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The New REPUBLIC

DECEMBER 3, 2008 • $4.95

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Plus

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Without slowing America's population growth, T. Boone's energy plan could be gone with the wind.

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*Based on U.S. Census Bureau projection, 2008
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THE NEW REPUBLIC

A Journal of Politics and the Arts

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Two Presidents at a Time

On November 15, President Bush will host a "Summit on Financial Markets and the World Economy" at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. Great Britain's Gordon Brown, China's Hu Jintao, and Russia's Dmitri Medvedev are among the 20 heads of state who will attend what's being billed as "Bretton Woods II." But there's one world leader, a soon-to-be head of state, who will be sitting out the proceedings: Barack Obama plans to spend the weekend in Chicago.

Ever since winning the White House on November 4, Obama has kept a wary distance from the financial crisis that began in September. Although many expected him to name the key members of his administration's economic team, including the new Treasury secretary, in the immediate aftermath of his election, transition officials have now indicated that no cabinet appointments will likely be made before Thanksgiving. Next week, when Congress reconvenes and Democrats attempt to pass emergency legislation to help the ailing auto industry, Obama won't be there, having announced that he'll be resigning his seat just before the lame-duck session begins. And then there's the aforementioned global financial summit, to which Obama will merely send envoys Madeleine Albright and Jim Leach, neither of whom is expected to play any substantial role in his administration.

To be sure, Obama has good reasons—both constitutional and political—for keeping this distance. As Obama and his aides have been saying since the moment he became president-elect, there's "only one president at a time." Having been attacked for being presumptuous during the campaign, Obama now seems loath to exceed the limited authority he has at the moment. What's more, without any official power at his disposal, it would be risky for Obama to take positions on matters over which he has no real control. As almost every president-elect soon learns, the thrill of an electoral victory almost immediately gives way to the tedium of a transition that, for all its hustle and bustle, often seems as if it was devised by some bureaucratic Beckett.

But this, of course, is no ordinary transition—and Obama must not treat it like one. The cautionary lesson here comes from the Herbert Hoover–Franklin Delano Roosevelt transition of 1932–1933, during which neither man acted with any real decisiveness on economic matters and what looked like the beginnings of an economic recovery instead became the single worst stretch of the Great Depression. Hoover, mindful that the voters had rejected him and believing that the mandate for any action rested with Roosevelt, was reluctant to implement any policies without FDR's endorsement. Meanwhile, Roosevelt, not wanting to squander any of his political capital on the policies of the man he'd just defeated, refused Hoover's entreaties. "It's not my baby," FDR said of the economic crisis. By the time Hoover left the White House and FDR was sworn in as the thirty-second president on March 4—the last time a president would be sworn in after January 20—hundreds of banks had failed and unemployment had skyrocketed. The baby FDR inherited was in much worse shape than it was when he was elected.

The challenge now for Obama is to avoid a similar fate. While Obama is certainly not impeding the auto-industry bailout plan congressional Democrats are currently crafting—and is probably pushing it on the margins, as during his recent visit with President Bush in the Oval Office, when he reportedly lobbied for it—he should be making a more public show of his support. Although he can no longer vote for the legislation, he should use his new bully pulpit to advocate its passage, and he should pledge that, should Bush not sign the legislation, he will once he is in office. Similarly, Obama should make a forceful public case for a new stimulus package. It's doubtful such a package would be passed before January 20 or, if it did pass, that Bush would sign it; but it's crucial that Obama generate enough momentum and support that he can get such a bill through Congress and onto his desk shortly after he's sworn in. Finally, Obama should name his Treasury secretary and his White House economic advisers during Congress's lame-duck session and authorize them to begin working in concert with the Bush administration on any policy actions Bush plans to take in the waning days of his presidency.

Obama should do all this not only to avoid a global financial meltdown; he should do it to ease the political challenges he'll face next year, as well. Although the conventional wisdom holds that a president would rather take over when things are at their nadir instead of trying (and possibly failing) to get things moving in the right direction before taking office, these are extraordinary times. Even before Obama's election, Americans had stopped looking to President Bush to solve the financial crisis. Now that Obama has been elected, it's only natural for Americans to turn to him; it doesn't matter that he has yet to actually take office. (Indeed, Obama stepping up to the plate as president-elect might actually increase Americans' confidence in the economy, if only because they'll see that someone is actually minding the store.) And, with 70 percent of American voters believing that the economy will get better during Obama's first term, according to one recent poll, Obama shouldn't be doing anything that will make that task more difficult. President Bush, with his decision to invade Iraq, ignored what Colin Powell called the "Pottery Barn rule" of "you break it, you own it." Obama did not break the economy, but, alas, even before he's been sworn in, he does own it. For the country's good—and his own—he needs to start acting like it. ◆

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Defining Barack Down

In which we separate the mandates from the boy-dates.

JONATHAN CHAIT

THE FUNNY THING about elections is that their meaning undergoes a metamorphosis the very instant they occur. A couple weeks before the vote, a Republican member of Congress declared at a McCain rally, "This campaign in the next couple of weeks is about one thing. It's a referendum on socialism." If you said *now* that the election was a referendum on socialism, or even mere liberalism, you'd be taken for a left-wing maniac.

Political scientists will tell you that a presidential "mandate" is just a social construct. But it's an important construct, in two ways. Morally, it matters that the president do what the public elected him to do—that, after all, is the point of democracy. And, politically, the majority party would like to know whether voters will reward or punish it for carrying out its agenda.

In reality, no president ever truly has a mandate, in the sense of the electorate voting for him as if his entire platform were a ballot initiative. Candidates' platforms play a role in who wins elections, but so do economic conditions, scandals, the candidates' personalities, and the Election Day weather in Philadelphia.

The proportion of each factor is variable, though sometimes the broad contours can be seen. (Lyndon Johnson's 1964 landslide was clearly more of an ideological affirmation than Jimmy Carter's 1976 post-Watergate squeaker.) Usually, an election's mandate-iness is hard to pinpoint. The trick is to depict elections that your party wins as pure policy seminars, and elections the other party wins as fluky popularity contests.

Former evil genius (and now just evil) Karl Rove offers a nice case study in how to play the game. "The country voted for change Tuesday," he wrote after the election. "But the precise direction of that change remains unclear. Mr. Obama's victory was personal rather than philosophical." Got that? Voters just liked the inexperienced black guy with the radical preacher, not his policy views. Yet, just a few weeks before the vote, Rove had deemed "people's persistent doubts concerning Mr. Obama" as one of his liabilities. Somehow, Obama's personal reputation not only survived but managed to propel him to victory.

TRB
From Washington

Just for fun, let's recall what Rove said four years ago. George W. Bush, remember, narrowly won by relentlessly turning the race into a contest of personal character. A *New York Times* poll found that voters favored John Kerry's stance on almost every issue, but "a majority of Americans continue to see Mr. Kerry as an untrustworthy politician." Bush even made one of his central themes an appeal to voters who liked his character but didn't support his policies. "Even when we don't agree," he'd say, "at least you know what I believe and where I stand." Naturally, after the election Rove insisted that Bush had won a mandate.

Both sides can play the mandate game, but Republicans seem to be better, or maybe just more shameless, at it. In 2004, Bush relentlessly boasted a mandate on the basis of his 2.5 percent popular-vote margin, and news organizations like the *Times*, CNN, NPR, MSNBC, CBS, and many others endorsed the claim. Even in 2000, when Bush lost the popular vote, his supporters crafted a cultural mythology in which Republicans were regular people from the heartland and Democrats a tiny clique of coastal elitists. This endlessly recycled trope helped create the *impression* of majority status—the political landscape, as one conservative columnist described it, was "a sea of red for Bush with small blotches of blue for Gore"—and helped Bush to govern as though he had a mandate.

Unlike Bush, Obama has declined to claim a mandate, and many Democrats have publicly said that he lacks one. And so, although Obama nearly tripled Bush's 2004 victory margin and did so without having to explicitly solicit the support of voters who disagreed with the core of his agenda, the conventional wisdom has quickly concluded that the public does not support his plans to make the tax code more progressive, reform health care, and the like.

You can argue about how important a role Obama's platform played in his victory. But, to read any newspaper in the days following the election, you'd think that Obama had to start crafting his agenda completely from scratch. "He ran on a platform to change the country and its politics," wrote *Washington Post* lead political analyst Dan Balz. "Now he must begin to spell out exactly how." *Now*? I thought that by the end of the campaign even blind and deaf hermits could tell you that Obama had a plan that could be found at barackobama.com/plan. I've resigned myself to the fact that political reporters don't feel compelled to familiarize themselves with the candidates' programs in detail, but they should, at minimum, be aware of their existence.

A related argument holds that Obama cannot carry out his plans because the United States is a "center-right country." *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham made this case in a much-discussed cover story, which asserted that Obama would have to move to the right or else "pay for [his] continued liberalism at the polls." Meacham's argument echoes the contention made by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge in their 2004 book *The Right Nation*, which explains why the United States is more conservative than other advanced democracies.

Meacham quotes Wooldridge to support his thesis: "Is this a center-right country? Yes, compared to Europe or Canada it's obviously much more conservative." But the question isn't whether Obama can move the United States to the left of Europe, it's whether he can move the United States to the left of where it currently stands.

The practical import of the Obama mandate debate has fallen on the question of whether he should pursue his goal of comprehensive health care reform, which numerous pundits and even some Democrats have tagged as dangerously ambitious. But this is one area where undiluted liberalism enjoys overwhelming public support. The public, by a roughly two-to-one margin, thinks the government has a responsibility to make sure that every American has adequate health care.

Congressional Democrats fear a repeat of 1994—when, as they see it, Bill Clinton over-interpreted his mandate and therefore failed to pass health care reform. This reading has it backward. Clinton's health care plan failed because Congress decided he didn't have a mandate and refused to pass it. If the Democrats fail this time, it will probably be because they psyched themselves out once again. ◆

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Are Democrats Less Patriotic Than Republicans?

OVER THE COURSE of a generation, the far right in America has peddled a story that says liberals and Democrats aren't patriots. That's patently false, but what is true is that liberals and Democrats have let them do it. Too many liberals have an allergic reaction to patriotism. Too many liberals are more comfortable criticizing America's flaws than celebrating its promise. And too many liberals think that criticism and dissent alone are the full measure of their patriotic duty. We think it's time for progressives and true patriots to reclaim patriotism, and we've written a little book that explains how. Read *The True Patriot*. Join the conversation at truepat.org.

"The True Patriot *is an eloquent statement of the ideals on which our democracy was founded and which need to be revived by modern day patriots. Nick Hanauer and Eric Liu remind us that patriotism is not so much about waving a flag as it is about living those ideals."*

GEORGE LAKOFF, *author of* Don't Think of an Elephant

"Every once in a while a book comes along that meets its moment. The True Patriot *is just such a work. Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer's eloquent, inspirational pamphlet reminds us of the revolutionary vision of the original pamphleteers and calls us to rededicate ourselves to advancing that revolution today. Their "true patriotism" is a patriotism not of thumping our chest, but of getting to work; a patriotism not just of a Fourth of July parade, but of the inherently progressive ideals we venerate when we put our hands to our heart as the parade marches by."*

ANDREI CHERNY, *Editor of* Democracy: A Journal of Ideas, *author of* The Next Deal *and* The Candy Bombers

"The True Patriot *makes a powerful argument that our heritage as a great nation is a progressive heritage, and it shows what each one of us can do to heal America and regain our position of moral leadership at home and abroad."*

GOVERNOR HOWARD DEAN

"A must read for progressives and conservatives alike. Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer return the definition of patriotism to the founders' ideal and challenge all of us to put aside meaningless partisanship and rise up through sacrifice and innovation to face the practical realities of the 21st century."

ANDY STERN, *President, Service Employees International Union and author of* A Country That Works

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The Mall

Drama Club

How Obama handles people.

THE MORNING AFTER the presidential election, a group of top Obama staffers and consultants gathered for brunch at a restaurant a few blocks from their Chicago headquarters. The mood was understandably emotional, and, before long, chief strategist David Axelrod rose to offer a valedictory. According to one person in the room, Axelrod lavished praise on his operatives for their discretion, for their collegiality, and for their resistance to all manner of Washington-think.

But, even as Axelrod spoke, a burst of Washington-style drama was making a mockery of these virtues. Late the previous night, the blogger Josh Marshall had gotten word that Illinois Representative Rahm Emanuel would sign on as Obama's White House chief of staff—a leak that likely emanated from Emanuel's office. But, when MSNBC confirmed the news Wednesday afternoon, Emanuel aides scrambled to deny it. By the following morning, it was more like "yes and no," as Emanuel publicly weighed the pluses and minuses of a White House move. On the one hand, he told reporters, there was the possibility of being "chief of staff to a historic presidency at a historic time." On the other, he'd be walking away from a chance of "rising into leadership" in the House. Mercifully, a final leak arrived soon after: Emanuel would take the job.

Emanuel's hiring seemed to hint at a newfound taste for big, unruly personalities on the part of the drama-averse president-elect. In addition to being less discreet than the typical Obama staffer, Emanuel is known as one of the most volatile and profane people ever to don a congressional lapel pin. (Obama once joked that Emanuel became "practically mute" when he lost half his middle finger in a meat-slicing accident.)

And yet, as Obama personnel decisions go, Emanuel wasn't the first head-scratcher. In making his vice-presidential selection, Obama passed over the famously circumspect Evan Bayh for the famously undisciplined Joe Biden. Insiders expect Obama's roster of big personalities to keep growing. Larry Summers, the impolitic former president of Harvard, is by all accounts a top contender for Treasury secretary. New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, late of the view that homosexuality is a "choice," is a leading candidate for secretary of state. Is Obama's militantly disciplined campaign becoming your standard messy presidency?

DEEP INTO the primary campaign, as it appeared the contest might never end, top Obama aides took to sporting shirts that blared "STOP THE DRAMA VOTE OBAMA." At the time, it was widely interpreted as a joking directive to voters and superdelegates. But the more subtle point may have been to invite a contrast with Hillaryland. Unlike the operatic Clinton operation, the Obama campaign was remarkably free of dysfunction and sloppy mistakes. This is partly because the candidate attracted true believers, especially in the early going, when Hillary seemed like a lock. Obama and his top brass also understood that the path to victory for a first-term, African American senator was precarious. It wouldn't take many stumbles—witness the gale-force reaction to Obama's "bitter . . . cling" comment—to sink the entire enterprise.

Still, the idea that everyone in Obamaland marched in happy lockstep was always more perception than reality.

WHITE H[illegible] WATCH *With* DREW FRIEDMAN

Meet Cronkite's children.

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"People do disagree with each other, with decisions made by [Obama]," one veteran Obamanaut says of the lockstep myth. For that matter, even the "happy" part isn't entirely right. "Steve Hildebrand wanted to kill me a few times," says Kirk Wagar, Obama's Florida finance chairman, of his early interactions with the deputy campaign manager. "I was like 'You need to do this.' He'd be like, 'You're just a finance guy.' I'd go, 'Fuck you.'"

Obama kept these battles off the public radar, however, by instituting an ethos lifted from the corporate boardroom: Dissent was encouraged, but, once a decision was made, as the campaign veteran put it, "everyone gets on board." "The deal was everyone got to be one-hundred-percent straight," says Wagar. "But, when it's over, it's over."

In this environment, Axelrod often loomed as the enforcer. Colleagues say his work on John Edwards's fractious presidential effort in 2004 was a searing experience he hoped never to repeat. At one point in the campaign, a *former* Obama aide said he could no longer talk to me because the Obama strategist was upset with him. Axelrod's business partner, campaign manager David Plouffe, instilled a similar ethic, ruling Obamaland by way of an implicit, don't-screw-with-me, threat. "Plouffe doesn't take any shit," says one aide. "He's the nicest guy in the world. He's never yelling. But he makes himself very clear."

It was, of course, the addition of Joe Biden that dealt an initial body-blow to Obamaland's disciplined corporate culture. Biden committed his first gaffe even before the end of his coming-out speech, referring to his new boss as "Barack America." In his early days on the trail, he publicly suggested Clinton would have made a better running-mate and mistakenly name-checked a future "Biden administration."

But, far from an aberration, the Biden pick reflects a side of Obama that's often overlooked: His taste in confidants runs toward the strong-willed and direct. Thanks to his writer's sensibility, Obama tends to view such specimens with anthropological fascination. Lest anyone forget, he chose as his pastor Jeremiah Wright, a man who rivals Laurence Olivier in his flair for the dramatic. These days, one of Obama's most trusted aides is a salty Southerner named Robert Gibbs, who first signed on as a communications strategist for the 2004 Senate race. Gibbs is known for his unyielding bluntness with the boss. One day at the outset of his Senate term, Obama sidled up to Gibbs and asked him to name the president of Tanzania. "Who the fuck cares?" was Gibbs's response, according to Obama biographer David Mendell. Obama began to laugh.

Obama, in fact, seems to crave such pushback. His years as a law professor have made Socratic dialogue his chief intellectual reflex. "The most awkward moment on a conference call is when he says, 'Okay, anybody disagree?' and there's just silence," says the aide. "He wants to make sure he's fully explored the issue before we move on." One of Obama's most valued economic advisers in recent months has been former Fed chairman Paul Volcker, partly because he opposed a stimulus package long after the rest of the economic team endorsed it. (Volcker eventually came around.)

All of which is to say that, for Obama, there may be such a thing as the wrong kind of drama and the right kind. Certainly it would have been hard to imagine him bringing on a notorious infighter like Clinton strategist Mark Penn (whom multiple Obamanauts cited as an example of the former). On the other hand, Emanuel and Biden both have reputations for being highly opinionated and unfailingly loyal. Biden embodies the blue-collar code of his Scranton upbringing. As for Emanuel, *Rolling Stone* once reported that, at a dinner after the 1992 campaign, he began stabbing the table with a steak knife as he pronounced Bill Clinton's enemies "dead."

The question is whether Obama can maintain this distinction between good and bad drama in the otherworldly vortex of the White House. The whole point of locating the campaign in Chicago was, after all, to keep aides out of the nation's capital, where rumormongering and backbiting are semi-official sports. On top of which, there's simply no way a government of several million federal employees will ever be as cohesive as a campaign of around 800. The latter had many egos but only one mission: to elect Obama president. By contrast, the White House will have dozens of competing missions—health care reform, energy, education, etc.—all with strong internal constituencies. And, whereas the Obama campaign benefited

Department of Corrections

"The Shadow President," November 19, incorrectly states that a Center for American Progress policy report had been the basis for a *Wall Street Journal* reporter's questioning of a John McCain aide about McCain's health care plan. In fact, the *Journal*'s questions were based on a report by the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center. We regret the error.

Home News

We are very pleased to announce a homecoming: Adam Kirsch, who was assistant literary editor of The New Republic from 1997 to 1999, now rejoins us as a senior editor. Since he left TNR, Adam has published five books of poetry, criticism, and biography. His controversial essays on poetry, many of which first appeared in our pages, were collected this year in *The Modern Element*, published by Norton. He served as the book critic of the late *New York Sun*, and his essays on literature and culture have appeared also in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Poetry*, and *The American Scholar*. His newest provocation begins on page 30.

David Cowles

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The Fifth C?

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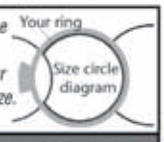

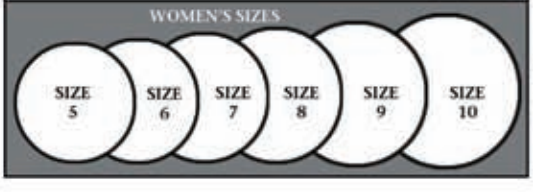

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from the underdog mindset of its true believers, an Obama administration will attract every ambitious law-school grad along the Amtrak corridor.

Already, there are signs of strain. Overshadowed by Emanuel's Hamlet routine was the unintentional rollout of Gibbs as White House press secretary, which transition officials first pushed back against, then grudgingly acknowledged. This week, Obama honchos beat back rumors that former secretary of state Warren Christopher, a man many Democrats associate with concave-chested wimpiness, would help guide the State Department transition. An e-mail asking foreign policy aides to stiff the press quickly found its way to *Politico*; internal discussions about Guantánamo leaked to the Associated Press. Other personnel news keeps gushing forth prematurely: Reports have former Clintonista Patti Solis Doyle in a senior White House job and former Gore aide Ron Klain as Biden's chief of staff.

This is not exactly the new politics Obama promised on the stump. While it's tough to say what the president-elect thinks of all the loose talk, there's some indication it grates on him. Take Biden's inexplicable observation, late in the campaign, that "an international crisis" would greet a President Obama. In response, Obama damned his running-mate with his "likeable enough" best, deadpanning that Biden was prone to "rhetorical flourishes." Something tells you Obama may endure a lot more rhetorical flourishes in the months to come.

Noam Scheiber

Bum Rush

Obama's secret plan to muzzle talk radio. Very, very secret.

Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, and other friends have spent the past year screaming about the horrors of Barack Obama. And, while it's true that they talked ad nauseam about socialism and the Weathermen and Jeremiah Wright, careful listeners would have noticed a recurring theme of anxiety: that Obama was going to use the newly acquired levers of government to destroy them. Specifically, conservative paranoia over the possible reinstatement of the "fairness doctrine," a defunct policy requiring that broadcasters allow opposing points of view to be heard over the airwaves, has reached a fevered pitch. In September, George Will was warning his readers that, "[u]nless McCain is president, the government will reinstate the . . . 'fairness doctrine.'" In October, *The Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page chimed in, predicting that under the spooky-sounding "liberal supermajority," the fairness doctrine was "likely to be reimposed," with the goal being "to shut down talk radio and other voices of political opposition." And, two weeks before the election, the *New York Post* blasted: "Dems get set to muzzle the right."

On Election Day, conservatives found a new bogeyman in Senator Chuck Schumer, after Fox News host Bill Hemmer cornered him about the issue on the air. Schumer just smirked: "I think we should all try to be fair and balanced, don't you?" Rush Limbaugh seized on Schumer's comments as evidence that the Democrats would "do everything they can" to bring the doctrine back. Two days after the election, *National Review*'s Peter Kirsanow tried to rally the troops to preempt the return of the policy. "Waiting until Inauguration Day to get geared up is too late. By that time the Fairness Doctrine Express will be at full steam—wavering Democrats will be pressed to support the new Democratic president, weak-kneed Republicans will want to display comity, the mainstream media will not be saddened to see talk radio annihilated and much of the public will be too enraptured by Obama's Camelot inauguration to notice or care."

To figure out who was causing such agitation, I went searching for the proponents of the fairness doctrine. I looked at Obama's position—and it turns out that he doesn't want the policy reinstated. Then I called the array of Democratic congressmen who had been tagged by conservatives as doctrine proponents. But they all denied any intention to push for its reinstatement. As some of the world's great egotists, it's not surprising that Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly believe they would be the first political prisoners interred in an Obama administration. But, the more I searched for actual evidence of the doctrine's return, the more I had to conclude that Schumer was just messing with their heads.

The fairness doctrine was adopted by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949, under the argument that the airwaves were a finite public resource. License holders were considered public trustees, with a responsibility to present opposing viewpoints on controversial issues. From the beginning, the doctrine was imprecise and difficult to enforce, and, by 1987, the policy was repealed.

It has become obvious by now that the biggest beneficiaries of the doctrine's demise were the conservative media. Last year, a study by the Center for American Progress (CAP) found that 91 percent of weekday talk radio is conservative, compared with just 9 percent that is progressive. Far from establishing an unencumbered marketplace of ideas, the free-market approach, critics complain, edged most voices out of the debate.

It's no wonder, then, that conservatives fear the fairness doctrine's return and busily document any favorable mention of the policy by Democrats. One of the most recent remarks that fueled the paranoia occurred in June, when John Gizzi, a reporter from the conservative magazine *Human Events*, asked House Speaker Nancy Pelosi if she would allow a vote on a bill called the Broadcaster Freedom Act, which was introduced last year by former talk-show host turned House member Mike Pence in an attempt to permanently outlaw the reinstatement of the policy. Pelosi said she wouldn't, mentioning New York Representative Louise Slaughter as an active proponent of reinstating the fairness doctrine. But Slaughter, like many other media-reform advocates, has shifted focus away from the doctrine in recent years, instead working to rein in the consolidation of media ownership. Shortly after the *Human Events* piece surfaced, a Democratic leadership staffer called Pelosi's office to ask if the mention indicated that the speaker had plans to move on new legislation promoting the doctrine. Pelosi's staff, according to that aide, confirmed that she did not. And, even if Pelosi were to allow the legislation to move forward, another staffer says, she would not have the Democratic support to get it passed.

Conservatives also focus on the 2005 effort by Democratic Representative Maurice Hinchey of New York to introduce a bill that would have reinstated the doctrine. But that effort went nowhere. At the time, Andrew Schwartzman, president of the Media Access Project, explained to the congressman

ANTHONY RUSSO

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that the measure did not have the support of the media-reform community. Schwartzman doubts Hinchey will try again. In fact, the last time a revival of the doctrine seemed possible was in 1993. Limbaugh's declaration that he was being "gang-muzzled" unleashed a public outcry against the bill, and Congress backed down.

Today, the doctrine has almost no support from media-reform advocates. According to Mark Lloyd, co-author of the CAP report, "I don't think there's any movement [to restore the fairness doctrine] at all. . . . We don't support it." Craig Aaron of the media-reform group FreePress says, "[I]n reality, the fairness doctrine as it existed is never ever coming back."

Responses from the offices of most of the Democrats who have been pegged as fairness-doctrine proponents—Schumer, Dick Durbin, Dianne Feinstein, and others—have ranged from a firm denial that the issue is a priority at all to disbelief at finding themselves at the center of a manufactured controversy. "Somebody plucked this out of the clear blue sky," says the press secretary for New Mexico Senator Jeff Bingaman, a Democrat who was questioned about the issue by a conservative radio-show host a few weeks ago. "This is a completely made-up issue." Senator Durbin's press secretary says that Durbin has "no plans, no language, no nothing. He was asked in a hallway last year, he gave his personal view"—that the American people were served well under the doctrine—"and it's all been blown out of proportion." In fact, as recently as last year, the House voted by an overwhelming three-to-one margin to temporarily prohibit the FCC from imposing the dead policy; 113 Democrats voted to support the move.

Meanwhile, the president-elect himself has said in no uncertain terms that he does "not support reimposing the fairness doctrine on broadcasters." Republican paranoia is nothing more than that.

Democrats may scratch their heads over why this has lately become a right-wing obsession, but the paranoia is not without precedent. The prospect of being in the opposition often brings out the worst in conservatives—paranoia and self-pity. Plus, when the conservative coalition seems threatened, there's no better way to unify the party than scaring up liberal bogeymen.

Take last year, when Congress failed to pass immigration reform. Some House members blamed Rush Limbaugh for whipping his listeners into such an anti-amnesty frenzy that would-be Republi-

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can supporters of the bill jumped ship. Conservatives were staring down a deep chasm. Their coalition looked vulnerable and ineffective. Then, Senator James Inhofe remembered that he had overheard Barbara Boxer and Hillary Clinton conspiring in a Capitol Hill elevator—not quite the place where those ladies usually do their strategic planning—to deliver a "legislative fix" to the Limbaugh problem. First Inhofe said that he had overheard them "the other day"; later, he said that it was three years prior. No matter. Shortly thereafter, Pence introduced his bill to permanently defeat the doctrine. Invoking fear of the doctrine turned out to be a quick fix after all: The bill never got out of committee, but it quickly gained the support of more than 200 congressional Republicans—and countless dittoheads.

Marin Cogan

(the F-word)

Gosh Darn Sons of Guns

We have an indecency problem. Really.

On Election Day, as the Supreme Court was debating the Bush administration's decision to fine TV networks for broadcasting "fleeting utterances" of the words "fuck" and "shit," an obscenity scandal in Britain cast light on the question before the justices: Can a single expletive actually be considered indecent? Two British shock jocks, Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross, broadcast a tape of themselves on BBC radio leaving a harassing answering-machine message for Andrew Sachs, a 78-year-old actor who played Manuel, the waiter on "Fawlty Towers." Ross used the F-word to boast that Brand had had sex with Sachs's granddaughter, a 23-year-old Goth burlesque dancer, with Brand adding that the news could lead the actor to kill himself. The broadcast, which was heard by two million people, provoked a national uproar. Listeners filed more than 40,000 complaints, and the prime minister and leader of the opposition condemned the pair, leading to the resignations of both Brand and the controller of BBC Radio 2.

It wasn't Ross's use of the F-word that enraged the public (he was suspended rather than fired) so much as it was his and Brand's sexist boasts and cruel taunting of a beloved, if fading, sitcom star. The Brand and Ross affair shows that it's not fleeting expletives that offend common decency but rather hateful or insulting speech. And the same lesson applies in the United States. None of the fleeting expletives that the Bush administration's Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has singled out in order to fine stations up to $325,000—such as Cher's declaration during a live broadcast of the 2002 Billboard Music Awards: "People have been telling me I'm on the way out every year, right? So fuck 'em"—have provoked any genuine national controversy at all. On the contrary, in 2003, 99.8 percent of all indecency complaints to the FCC were submitted by a single conservative interest group, the Parents Television Council.

At the Supreme Court argument, Justice Antonin Scalia lamented the "coarsening of manners," adding, "I am not persuaded by the argument that people are more accustomed to hearing these words than they were in the past." I share Scalia's concerns about the coarsening of public manners on television, but he is willfully denying the evidence that most Americans no longer view fleeting expletives as indecent. The Supreme Court has said that the FCC can only ban epithets that are considered genuinely offensive by contemporary community standards. For that reason, the justices should strike down the Bush FCC's fleeting expletive policy, and, if they don't, the Obama FCC should repeal it. But this suggests a real problem—the vulgarization of culture—without a clear legal, political, or even technological solution.

When it came to single expletives, the FCC used to be more lenient. Beginning in 1978, when the Supreme Court held, in *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation*, that George Carlin's "seven dirty words" monologue could be banned as indecent, the FCC has defined indecency narrowly. Purporting to be guided by national community standards, the FCC said expletives could only be banned if they graphically and repeatedly depicted sexual or excretory activities in a manner designed to shock or titillate. By contrast, "fleeting and isolated" epithets were not considered to be indecent. For example, when, at the Golden Globes in 2003, U2's Bono declared on air that his award was "really, really fucking brilliant," the FCC declined to issue a fine.

All that changed in 2004 when the Bush FCC decided that the F-word and the S-word always have a graphic meaning and that—except on news broadcasts—even a single use of either word can be banned as indecent. Under the new policy, the FCC reserves the right to evaluate each fleeting expletive in context, giving five unelected commissioners the power to decide whether a particular expletive was "essential to the nature of an artistic or educational work or essential to informing viewers on a matter of public importance." This has led to a series of arbitrary judgments: ABC wasn't fined for broadcasting *Saving Private Ryan*, because the FCC decided that expletives were central to the message of the film, but an educational station was fined for broadcasting the PBS documentary "The Blues" because the expletives uttered by music producers weren't deemed necessary. (In reviewing episodes of "NYPD Blue," the Solomonic commission found that "bullshit" was patently offensive, but "dickhead" was not.) And, while the FCC has decided to "proceed with the utmost restraint" when reviewing expletives on news broadcasts, it has not done so in the case of sports broadcasts, leading one commentator to call for a special exemption for professional athletes.

In addition to leading to arbitrary rulings, the fleeting expletives policy doesn't reflect the actual community standards of Americans, who are, for better or worse, increasingly tolerant of smutty television. A Gallup poll taken after Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl halftime show in 2004 found that the number of Americans who weren't offended by the fleeting glimpse of her bosom was greater than the number who were—despite the FCC's conclusion that the incident was patently offensive. Movies are also a reliable window onto community standards: PG-13 movies, available to children, often contain fleeting uses of the F-word. The FCC conclusion that the F-word always has a sexual connotation is belied by the conclusion of most Americans that it never has a

ANTHONY RUSSO

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sexual connotation, unless it's actually being used to describe sex.

At the same time that they are more tolerant of expletives, Americans (and Europeans) are less tolerant of sexual and racial bigotry. Don Imus's racist comments in 2007 about the "nappy-headed hos" on Rutgers's basketball team—one of the national scandals that provoked genuine outrage and an avalanche of real (as opposed to manufactured) complaints to the FCC—didn't trigger an official investigation because Imus didn't use the F-word. And, of course, a government committed to the First Amendment has no more business policing hate speech than expletives.

Although Justice Scalia's 1950s vision of American community standards is out of date, he's right to worry about the coarsening of public manners on television. So, if the government can't protect my two-year-old sons from sex, violence, and cursing on the networks, are there any other solutions? In an optimistic Supreme Court brief, the Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT) insists that technology can do the trick: "User empowerment" tools like the V-chip and digital video recorders can allow parents to filter all broadcast content that enters the home, and, as children increasingly access broadcast shows for free on the less-regulated Internet, Internet filters can protect their tender sensibilities, too. For all these reasons, the CDT argues, network television is no longer "uniquely pervasive" and accessible to children—the factors that led the Court in the 1970s to allow regulation of indecency in the first place.

I'm less optimistic. My two-year-olds won't be allowed to watch any television until they're older, but I still find it difficult to keep them away from the relentless assaults of the screen in public places—on airplanes, in restaurants, and at the doctor. The experience has helped me understand that the debates we like to discuss in terms of indecency are really about privacy—namely, how to protect ourselves from the unwanted intrusions of an increasingly ubiquitous digital culture. The government has no business enforcing norms of indecency that actual American communities no longer embrace. But, at the same time, that leaves those of us who are trying to carve out enclaves of respite from the intrusions of the screen more vulnerable than ever. As Barack Obama reminds us, the only solution, however imperfect, is to turn the television off.

Jeffrey Rosen

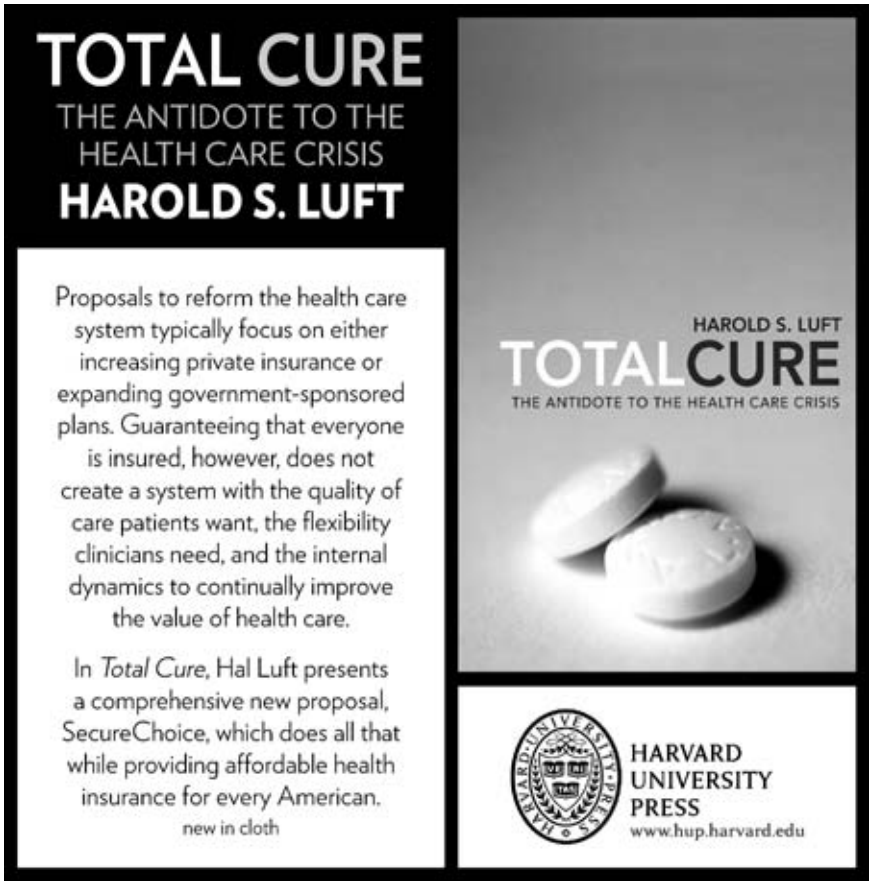
Trading Up

The recession's here. Let's tax carbon!

The first hundred days of any presidency rarely go off as planned, but, for now, Barack Obama seems to know what's at the top of his to-do list. In late October, he told *Time*'s Joe Klein that "a new energy economy" would "be my number-one priority when I get into office." But then, as if to cut off a lurking objection, Obama quickly tacked on a qualifier: "assuming, obviously, that we have done enough to just stabilize the immediate economic situation." The caveat seemed to nod at a nascent conventional wisdom: Now that the United States is staring down the barrel of a nasty recession, many Washington types wonder if Obama will have to tear up that to-do list and rein in his ambitious climate and energy proposals.

True, not all of Obama's green ideas are controversial: You can't pick up a newspaper op-ed page these days without seeing yet another economist argue that government spending on clean energy and eco-friendly infrastructure could provide the Keynesian boost necessary to haul the economy out of its mire. But the linchpin of Obama's energy platform wasn't new spending; it was an economy-wide cap on carbon-dioxide emissions, in which a decreasing number of tradeable pollution permits would be auctioned off each year, so as to ratchet down greenhouse gases and help avert drastic global warming. Energy experts tend to agree that it's not enough for the government to fund alternative-energy sources; the only way to usher in the "new energy economy" Obama envisions is to make it costlier to burn fossil fuels. But that's the catch: Since Obama's cap-and-trade proposal would essentially act as a tax and increase the price of oil, gas, and coal, he downplayed this aspect of his plan on the trail—and it's the one idea that now looks most vulnerable. As House energy and commerce chair John Dingell recently told *The Wall Street Journal*, "In times of economic downturns, members [of Congress] are extremely reluctant to add burdens to the economy, and we're going to confront that problem."

The queasiness is understandable. On the surface, it really *doesn't* sound like a hot idea to impose broad new regulations on a struggling economy. In this case, though, the fear is misguided. Global warming is urgent enough that the next administration will need to go all-out on the issue, passing not just a green stimulus package but especially a cap on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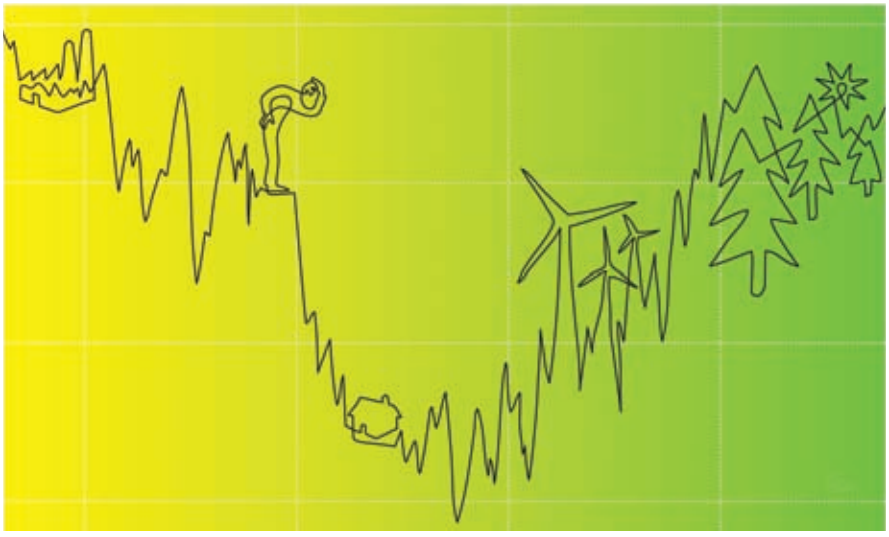
carbon. And, not only is the recession a poor excuse to hold back, it may even be all the more reason to act.



If there's any upside to a recession (and it's hardly much consolation), it's that the accompanying decline in energy use gives us some breathing room to meet long-term emissions targets. (The rough consensus among climate scientists is that the world should aim to cut greenhouse-gas emissions 50 percent below 1990 levels by 2050, a goal that sounded increasingly preposterous in recent years as countries were belching up carbon dioxide at a pace exceeding even the direst forecasts of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.) The downside, however, is that the fall of oil and gas prices is forcing investors to shelve alternative-energy projects: The WilderHill index of clean-tech stocks has tumbled more than 50 percent since September, and even T. Boone Pickens is putting aside his beloved wind farms for now. The main reason the solar and wind industries aren't facing total collapse is government policy: Some 30 states have laws requiring utilities to get a fixed percentage of their electricity from renewable sources by a certain date.

More problematic still, a recession makes it trickier for politicians to contemplate new environmental rules. Conservatives like Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe have been thundering that an emissions cap—or any policy that raises the price of carbon—will be the death blow for an already atrophying economy. Now, climate-change skeptics are *always* saying that carbon caps will put us in the poorhouse, recession or no. (Last year, when the economy was still chugging along, the Chamber of Commerce aired an anti-cap-and-trade ad showing a family forced to cook breakfast by candlelight and huddle together in bed for warmth.) The question is whether Obama should pay these naysayers more heed during a slump, or whether he should follow the example of European leaders like Nicolas Sarkozy, who, despite the financial crisis, are working to tighten the EU's emissions-trading regime.

As it turns out, a recession isn't a bad time to get started on climate legislation. Even if Congress raced to pass a cap-and-trade bill in 2009, it would take some time—likely a few years—just to set up a complex new regulatory regime. Moreover, as David Wheeler, a climate-policy expert at the Center for Global Development, points out, an economic slump actually offers a prime opportunity to start trading: If Congress sets the initial economy-wide cap at pre-recession levels, then pollution permits will be exceedingly cheap as long as the economy—and hence energy use—is still shrinking. (Indeed, the downturn in Europe has caused the price of carbon to hit rock-bottom levels.) This would give companies time to learn the system and plan for the future without being assailed right away by high prices.

Congress could then use the interim years to go full speed ahead on a green stimulus package. Both Obama and Al Gore have stressed the need for a new electric grid that could link up to faraway wind and solar farms and better manage electricity demand. It's a good idea: According to a new report by the North American Electric Reliability Council, any attempt to make major emissions cuts could put unbearable strain on the grid unless it's revamped. Other programs to boost the energy efficiency of the economy—retrofitting buildings, say, or capturing and using waste heat from factories—are also needed. All these measures would help utilities and businesses make reductions more cheaply once the cap does start clamping down.

Granted, no cap on greenhouse gases will be totally cost-free. But it's important to be clear about what those costs really are. One recent survey of five respected economic models from academic and government groups found that cap-and-trade policies like the Lieberman-Warner bill considered by Congress this summer would only cost about three-hundredths of a percentage point of the country's GDP per year. (The size of the U.S. economy, in other words, would reach $26 trillion in April rather than January of 2030.) Jay Apt, a professor at Carnegie Mellon's Electric Industry Center, explains that the bulk of cuts under a cap-and-trade regime would likely come from the country's electric utilities—and he estimates that the electric-power sector could avoid or capture 80 percent of its emissions for about $65–$90 billion per year, on average. That, he notes, is comparable to the cost of compliance at the peak of the original Clean Air Act, which, contrary to doomsday predictions from industry lobbyists, didn't put any noticeable dents in the economy. (The law did, however, help midwife new businesses that sold scrubbers, particulate matter filters, and flue gas desulfurization technologies to the rest of the world.)

Of course, it's one thing to suggest that emissions restrictions won't be half as crippling as opponents claim, but is it possible that cap-and-trade could actually *bolster* the economy? Perhaps. If, for instance, the revenues raised by auctioning off pollution permits were rebated to consumers, most families could see their incomes rise, according to one University of Massachusetts study. What's more, the certainty that clear rules on carbon are finally on the way could help get private investment flowing again. As Chuck Gray, the executive director of the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, explained, "climate-change legislation is essential no matter what the economic situation," because "it will remove many of the uncertainties that are preventing state regulators, utilities, and others from planning and financing new electricity investments." Venture capitalists have lately been dipping their toes in the clean-tech pool—investing $2.2 billion in more than 200 deals in 2007—but many financiers, as a recent *New York Times Magazine* story made clear, are still waiting for a more supportive policy framework to emerge. Sounds like cap-and-trade should be at the top of someone's to-do list after all.

Bradford Plumer

Felix Sockwell

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From TR to BHO

Obama, The New Republic, and the presidents we've loved.

Not that my political history is so important. After all, no one in either the near or more remote environs of The New Republic required my enthusiasm for Barack Obama to kindle their own. As for my own enthusiasm—actually, it was at first a quizzical intrigue—it was sparked by the disciplined and thoughtful passion of my thirtysomething children, first my film director (*First Love, Last Rites*; *The Chateau*; *The Ex*) son, soon thereafter my writer (*Vanity Fair*) daughter. Then a former student (not to be named) who is now a good friend of both mine and Obama's began to point, not at all so obliquely, to the senator's strengths … and his vulnerabilities.

Obama was not yet a candidate, and I was waiting for Al Gore's nod to the huge public that awaited him. The nod never came, and the senator declared his intentions. The rest, of course, is history.

This was hardly my first enthusiasm for a candidate. I signed on with Eugene McCarthy in October 1967 before there was a campaign and before there was even a "dump Johnson" movement. A small group of us from Massachusetts met Gene for dinner at a restaurant in the Capitol, a dark and dreary dive. As with other groups that visited with McCarthy, he was not asking us to join him. We were the supplicants and he the chosen. Then, in the wake of McCarthy's strong showing in the New Hampshire primary and Robert Kennedy's decision that he would run for the presidency, Johnson decided to leave the White House rather than be pushed by the obvious tide. An unseemly "dump McCarthy" movement launched. RFK lost Oregon but won (not by much) California, on the night of which victory the first Palestinian terrorist in America shot three bullets into his body, and he was dead. McCarthy went to St. John's, a Catholic retreat in Minnesota, and meditated, brooding over whether the nastiness of his fight with Bobby might not have provoked the hatred that stoked the murder. For all intents and purposes, Gene stopped his campaign for the designation.

Amid the riots in Chicago's Grant Park, Hubert Humphrey (for the war, against the war) became the ungainly candidate of a party bloodied by Vietnam and in America, too. I wrote an article for The New Republic in the fall of 1968 urging readers not to vote for Humphrey. Richard Nixon was his opponent. I am still ashamed.

I stayed out of presidential politics for 20 years until a student and friend, Al Gore, campaigned for the Democratic nomination in 1988. It is (tragi)comic to recall who beat him out for the party's nomination. You recall—don't you?—Michael Dukakis, the smallest (and not by size) man to run for president in modern times. Gore went back to the Senate and, four years later, became the most salient vice president in our history.

So the election of Barack Obama has been for me the culmination of a journey—much interrupted, to be sure—over 40 years. Of course, The New Republic has been a companion in the journey. Or, rather, I have been a companion in its journey over the last 34 years. I acquired TNR, I told myself in 1974, to help reverse the utter conquest of the Democratic Party by McGovernism two years earlier. It was not simply George McGovern but

large elements in the party that had embraced a macabre duo of attitudes in foreign policy. One was pure isolationism, articulated by McGovern himself in the mawkish whine, "Come home, America!" And the other was a certain naive sympathy with communist revolutions, as if they were basically "good at heart." What else would you expect from McGovern, a delegate to the Progressive Party (that is, Communist Party front) convention that put up Henry Wallace for president in 1948?

The New Republic came also to represent, under the editorships of both Michael Kinsley and Rick Hertzberg, what was dubbed "neoliberalism." If we objected to a certain insistent statism and distrust of private initiative in the economic policies of the post–New Deal and Fair Deal Democratic Party, we also insisted on the continuing relevance of equality as both a norm and practical aim of government. You cannot have a rich and deep society when many of its people do not share its fruit.

And on race, the great subtext of American history, a bleeding subtext, we remained, undaunted and unalloyed, a tribune of equal rights and integration. In this sense, I believed that Barack Obama is what he is, a black person of mixed race. "Mixed race," like "mixed ethnicity" or "mixed culture," is a common feature in the life of the nation and will soon become the dominant trait of its population. Individuals so constructed can choose which of their different sinews is most important to them, as the next president has clearly done. But Obama is not only integrated into the society; he is "also" (which somewhat degrades its significance) the first person to truly stand for an integrated American commonwealth.

That is reason enough for us to have been for him, for TNR actually to have been the *very first* national publication to devote a cover story to Barack Obama. The 5,000-word article was written by senior editor Noam Scheiber. It was called "Race Against History" and was published on May 31, 2004. How's that for foresight!

Many friends of this magazine—and even people who write for it occasionally—will be in the Obama administration. Such a circumstance is not *new* for The New Republic. TNR had an intimate relationship with the presidency of Woodrow Wilson but also with Theodore Roosevelt, who once complained that our criticism of him was the work of "three circumcised Jews and three anemic Christians."

The 1920s were an errand into the wilderness. Starting with the failure of the League of Nations until the Great Crash, TNR was on the political outs. Then, with the arrival of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, its proximity to, its intimacy with, the administration's leading figures was at once exhilarating and tense. FDR's chief troubleshooter, Tommy Corcoran, regularly complained of TNR's hostility in its pages to the New Deal. But the editors were loath to see in the president, in any president, a savior.

This challenge would not arise again for a decade and a half. In 1948, the editors wanted Harry S. Truman replaced as the Democratic candidate. By whom? By Dwight David Eisenhower, that's whom. Ike was elected president as a Republican in 1952, and TNR was clearly in opposition. All of this changed in 1960, when John Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon in an extremely tight election, maybe even stolen for JFK. Shortly thereafter, Kennedy was photographed descending from an airplane carrying a copy of The

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New Republic. Again there was some affinity, close affinity, between the people around JFK and the folks at TNR. In the thousand days of the Kennedy presidency, the magazine was close to the administration and some of its goals but also critical of its hesitancy about civil rights. It also became increasingly perturbed by the administration's gradual and virtually unacknowledged slide into war in Indochina.

And now we come to the ascendancy of Barack Obama. When I first met him, he cited something that I had written. We immediately laughed about how well-prepared he was. Once again, we begin an administration as admirers of the president and as admirers of some of those closest to him. That is, we begin his administration as partisans of his essential purposes. These are, I believe:

1. to reconstruct the American social contract so that it enlarges the rewards to all as it allows for gains to those who invest wealth, energy, commitment, and imagination to any and all productive enterprise in the country;
2. to develop new rules insuring that what we call free enterprise should not be captive of secrecy, deceit, lust, and untested fashion;
3. to reestablish and expand American might, in concert with traditional democratic allies, so that it is intrinsically convincing and prudently used on behalf of and with decent societies endangered by aggression and subverted by either armed doctrine or terror;
4. to recognize that the international system is broken and simply unwilling to transcend its degrading but pretentious addictions. The plight of Darfur and of the Congo are only the most up-to-date and prominent instances of this failure. (Let me be clear on this: I believe that many of Obama's people are deluded by the United Nations, which is the perfect expression of this collapse.)

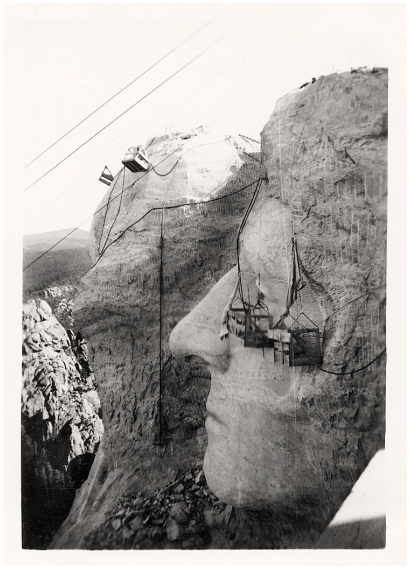
Maybe I am over-interpreting Obama's words and intentions. But we will see soon enough. We will support Obama when we think him right and oppose him when we think him wrong. No president has come to power facing grimmer economic circumstances except Franklin Roosevelt. Just how grim, we do not yet know. I fear that the onrushing news will be horrific. So we must be tolerant. More than that: We may even have to be indulgent. Bush's motives in this situation are both unknown and suspect. Obama's are not.

Martin Peretz

The Attic-Box History of America

With the way that photography travels these days—from a cell phone to the Internet in a heartbeat—it is hard to remember that so many powerful images from our history remain locked up in shoeboxes and junk drawers. Who We Were: A Snapshot History of America, by Michael Williams, Richard Cahan, and Nicholas Osborn, published by CityFiles Press, is the first comprehensive attempt to plumb the depths of America's private archives.

Above, spectators wave as Richard Nixon arrives in Riverside, California, in 1970.



Left, workers carving out the faces on Mount Rushmore in the 1930s. Above, an anonymous, undated photo.

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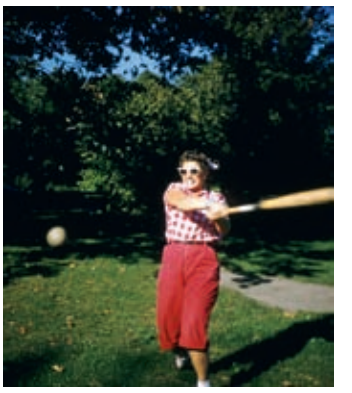

Counterclockwise from top: A Ku Klux Klan parade, circa 1922; a 1955 snap of suburban tract houses, with the owner's home labeled in pen; a photo taken on Coney Island in Brooklyn in 1934, the year dozens of men were arrested there for revealing their chests; an anonymous photo, probably from the 1940s. In the center, a Kodachrome image from the mid-1950s marked "Dede at bat."

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Panic in Detroit

This is not your father's Oldsmobile we're rescuing.

JONATHAN COHN

General Motors has come to Washington, begging for a $25 billion bailout to keep it and its ailing Detroit counterparts going next year. But nobody seems too thrilled about the prospect. Liberals dwell on the companies' gas-guzzling sport-utility vehicles. Conservatives obsess over all the well-paid union members with gold-plated benefits. And people of all ideological backgrounds remember how they used to buy domestic cars, years ago, but stopped because the cars were so damn lousy. "The downfall of the American auto industry is indeed a tragedy," the *Washington Post* editorial board sermonized recently, "but the automakers and the United Auto Workers have only themselves to blame for much of it." And, if they have only themselves to blame, the argument goes, why do they deserve taxpayer help? Let them fail and file for bankruptcy. In the long run, the economy will be stronger and the workers better off. It'd be worth the short-term pain, which might not even be so severe.

In normal times, with another company, that might be correct. But these are not normal times, just as GM is not any old company. Nor is the simple economic morality tale everybody repeats about the auto industry accurate. Detroit has come a long way since the days of wide lapels and disco. GM, Ford, and Chrysler are taking precisely the sorts of steps everybody says are necessary—or, at least, they were taking those steps until an unexpected trifecta of high gas prices, vanishing credit, and a deep recession hit. Rescuing the auto industry is not, as so many people suppose, a question of giving Detroit one extra shot at transformation. It's a question of giving Detroit a chance to finish a transformation that was already underway.

One reason for the casual support for letting GM fail is the assumption that bankruptcy would be no big deal: As *USA Today* editorialized recently, "Bankruptcy need not mean that the company disappears." But, while it's worked out that way for the airlines, among others, it's unlikely a GM business failure would play out in the same fashion. In order to seek so-called Chapter 11 status, a distressed company must find some way to operate while the bankruptcy court keeps creditors at bay. But GM can't build cars without parts, and it can't get parts without credit. Chapter 11 companies typically get that sort of credit from something called Debtor-in-Possession (DIP) loans. But the same Wall Street meltdown that has dragged down the economy and GM sales has also dried up the DIP money GM would need to operate.

That's why many analysts and scholars believe GM would likely end up in Chapter 7 bankruptcy, which would entail total liquidation. The company would close its doors, immediately throwing more than 100,000 people out of work. And, according to experts, the damage would spread quickly. Automobile parts suppliers in the United States rely disproportionately on GM's business to stay afloat. If GM shut down, many if not all of the suppliers would soon follow. Without parts, Chrysler, Ford, and eventually foreign-owned factories in the United States would have to cease operations. From Toledo to Tuscaloosa, the nation's assembly lines could go silent, sending a chill through their local economies as the idled workers stopped spending money.

Restaurants, gas stations, hospitals, and then cities, counties, and states—all of them would feel pressure on their bottom lines. A study just published by the Michigan-based Center for Automotive Research (CAR) predicted that three million people would lose their jobs in the first year after such a Big Three meltdown, swelling the ranks of the unemployed by nearly one-third nationally and leading to hundreds of billions of dollars in lost income. The Midwest would feel the effects disproportionately, but the effect would reach into every community with a parts supplier or factory—and, to a lesser extent, into every town and city with a dealership. In short, virtually every community in the country would be touched.

This is, admittedly, a worst-case scenario—the sort of dire projection you'd expect from a Michigan-based think tank that receives a small amount of industry money. (And, as a Michigan resident, I should disclose my own small conflict: My wife, an engineering professor, once directed a research project funded by Ford.) But the economists and industry analysts I tracked down this week vouched for CAR's integrity and suggested the group's estimate was in the right ballpark. Susan Helper, an economist at Case Western University and a specialist on the automobile industry, told me her rough calculations suggest the most optimistic outcome would be "just" half a million jobs lost—and that's only if the failures are contained to GM. But she expects much worse, given the likely spillover effects: Her best estimate is that between 1.5 and two million jobs would be lost. The price of addressing such human misery with unemployment benefits, Medicaid, and other services would be huge, making a $25 billion loan seem like a bargain—particularly if the companies pay it back, just as Chrysler did after its bailout in the 1980s.

Still, not everybody finds such arithmetic compelling. Critics of a bailout note, rightly, that bankruptcy isn't simply about giving distressed companies financial protection to get through rough patches. It's also about letting the free market do its work—about forcing inefficient companies to reorganize or, failing that, to make way for others. If the government spares Detroit from failure, the government might end up supporting obsolete companies while rewarding both management and labor for their oafish behavior.

Make no mistake: The Big Three deserve some scorn. For decades, they were complacent about foreign competition and the need to make more fuel-efficient cars; then they responded by seeking government protection in the form of trade barriers and lax mileage standards. The United Auto Workers (UAW) were willing accomplices to these acts, insisting upon rigid work rules defining who could do what job and under what conditions. That, plus their fierce protection of jobs even at unprofitable plants, made it difficult for the Big Three to adapt as consumer desires changed. Detroit steadily lost business to companies like Honda and Toyota that managed to make cars more efficiently—and figured out, early on, that rising gas prices would increase

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demand for more fuel-efficient vehicles.

But what's missing in the tsk-tsk editorials is any recognition that the culture of Detroit has been changing, however belatedly, starting with its labor relations. Ford led the way years ago by reaching site-specific "competitive operating agreements" with locals at different plants, rather than sticking to one national agreement, thereby enabling it loosen work rules and engage in the sort of collaborative quality management on which industry leader Toyota made its reputation. Then, last year, the UAW reached a breakthrough agreement in which it granted the companies similar flexibility, agreed to a two-tier wage structure for new hires, and set up a separate trust fund to finance future retiree health benefits. The companies would provide the initial money for this trust, but, henceforth, the unions would manage it—thereby taking off the companies' books a tremendous burden that had, on its own, accounted for about half the gap in compensation between unionized workers for the Big Three and non-unionized workers for foreign-owned automakers. "I think they've shown unprecedented ability to change and transform the union," says Kristin Dziczek, who directs CAR's Automotive Labor and Education program. "They understand what is at stake."

So far, the results are promising. According to the most recent Harbour Report, the benchmark guide for manufacturing prowess, Chrysler's factories now match Toyota's for the most productive, while both Ford's and GM's are improving. (A Toledo Jeep factory was actually named the nation's most efficient.) *Consumer Reports* now says Ford's reliability is approaching that of perennial leaders Honda and Toyota, whose ratings actually slipped last year. In late 2010, GM will introduce the Chevrolet Volt, a plug-in hybrid that can go 40 miles without gas, and the Chevrolet Cruze, a compact that relies solely on gas but that gets 45 miles to the gallon. The Volt would represent a rare leap ahead of the Japanese, who never embraced plug-in technology with the same enthusiasm. It's also typical of the better cars that observers say Detroit has in store. "There's a lot of accumulated negativity about these companies out there," says Wharton's John Paul MacDuffie, who directs the International Motor Vehicle Program. "U.S. consumers gave the Big Three the benefit of the doubt for a long time before turning away from them, and now their reputation is worse than their actual performance and progress toward needed reforms."

MacDuffie would be the first to say the progress is incomplete. As proof that Detroit still has a lot to learn, he points to recent strategic mistakes like its overreliance on deep sticker-price discounts and large rebates, which dilute brand reputation and resale value. But Chapter 11 seems like a particularly poor way to fix these sorts of lingering problems. Bankruptcy is a messy, expensive process that would likely do more for lawyers than for the automaker, which has already taken the most obvious steps toward efficiency. "With the airlines, it was to get out of their labor contracts and to get out from under the underfunded pension positions they created," says Mark Oline, a highly regarded automotive analyst with Fitch Ratings. "But, in the case of GM and Ford, they have done a very good job with the UAW to address those problems of wages and benefits."

If anything, Chapter 11 might reinforce some of Detroit's worst habits—starting with its tendency to seek the lowest prices from parts suppliers, even if that means switching companies frequently and paying relatively little attention to part quality. Toyota is famous for taking the opposite approach: It eschews easy savings in order to maintain long-term relationships with suppliers; these relationships, in turn, allow Toyota and its suppliers to collaborate on design and quality. It's precisely the sort of production technique that the Big Three should be adopting. But, in a Chapter 11 filing, under pressure to improve the bottom line as fast as possible, they'd be unlikely to do that.

And that's assuming they even make it to Chapter 11. In the more likely event that GM had to shut down altogether under Chapter 7, as most experts I consulted predict, the company's institutional knowledge would end up on the proverbial shop floor. Among the casualties could be the Volt—and any near-term hopes of a marketable plug-in for the domestic auto industry. "Maybe those engineers get rehired, maybe not," says Case Western's Susan Helper. "But you lose those working relationships; you lose all the time invested. … [People] don't really have a sense of the things that have to get put in motion, when you have ten-year planning horizons for new engines. When you disrupt that, it's very costly."

Those are among the reasons most analysts and economists, however reluctantly, have concluded that a better solution would be another government bailout—albeit one with lots of conditions attached. Those conditions would include limits on executive compensation, as in the Wall Street rescue, but also more specific requirements designed to push the Big Three toward greater innovation and fuel efficiency. The bailout might also require more concessions from the unions, perhaps over the relatively generous health benefits UAW workers enjoy. And it would probably mean cleaning house in GM's executive suites. (Vice Chairman Bob Lutz, a notorious skeptic of climate-change theory, should be the first to go.)

It appears as if President-elect Obama and the Democratic leadership in Congress are thinking along those lines already (although it'll be surprising if they demand concessions from unions that just played such a big role in electing them). But, if the government demands that the Big Three and its workers live up to more obligations, the government—which is to say, the taxpaying public—must live up to some obligations of its own. Companies like Honda operate out of countries that made health and retirement benefits a national responsibility. And the perennially high price of gasoline, a product of high gas taxes in virtually all other highly developed countries, has ensured a steady market for their smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles. There's no reason not to treat U.S. car companies, and car owners, the same way.

For now, that would mean government would assume some health and pension obligations (which it would have to do in a bankruptcy anyway, though its Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation) while subsidizing the purchase of fuel-efficient cars (something it is already planning to do, thanks to recent tax changes). But the debate over a Detroit bailout should begin a larger political conversation, one that sprawls beyond the Midwest and the intellectual confines of lean production techniques and workers' legacy costs. Whatever mistakes the Big Three and the UAW have made, their struggles are a pretty good indicator of why the government—not employers—should be responsible for providing health insurance and why, without broader action to fight climate change, improving fuel efficiency will be a struggle. Naturally, the Big Three should enthusiastically promote these reforms, something they haven't done in the past.

Nothing can stop the revolution in auto-making and drivetrain technology; even under the best of circumstances, the Big Three need to become smaller, more efficient, and more environmentally conscious. But if the government manages that change and uses it as a springboard for discussion of broader economic reforms, everybody can benefit. ◆

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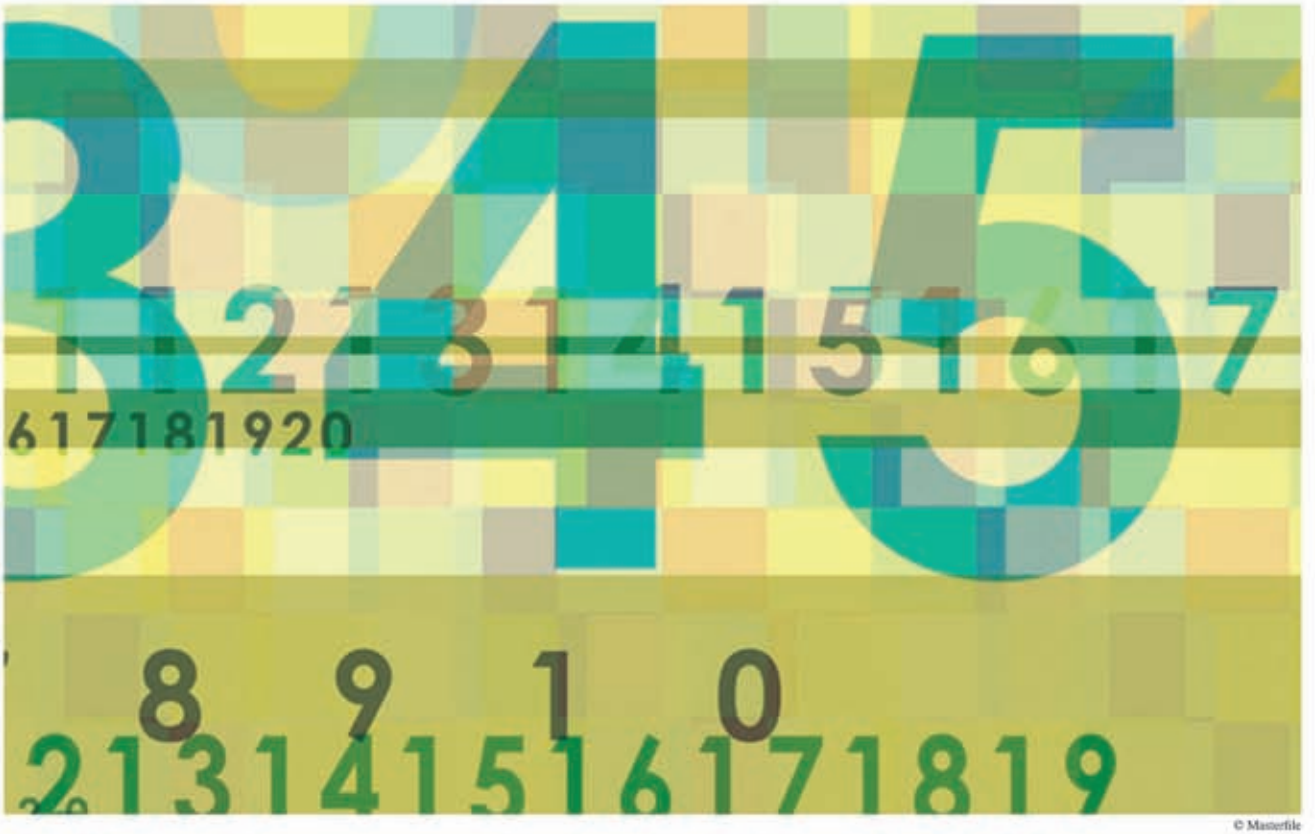

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Debt Man Walking

Economists know the fatal flaw in our system—but they can't agree how to fix it.

JOHN B. JUDIS

For those Americans who are not daily readers of the *Financial Times*, the past few months have been a crash course in the abstract and obscure instruments and arrangements that have derailed the nation's economy. From mortgage-backed securities to credit default swaps, the financial health of the country has undergone a gory public dissection. And yet, as Barack Obama prepares to take office, one particularly frightening problem has escaped public notice; indeed, it may not even make the agenda of the global summit being held this weekend, dubbed "Bretton Woods II" after the postwar system of currency controls. The international monetary system is in big trouble.

For decades, the United States has relied on a tortuous financial arrangement that knits together its economy with those of China and Japan. This informal system has allowed Asian countries to run huge export surpluses with the United States, while allowing the United States to run huge budget deficits without having to raise interest rates or taxes, and to run huge trade deficits without abruptly depreciating its currency. I couldn't find a single instance of Obama discussing this issue, but it has been an obsession of bankers, international economists, and high officials like Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke. They think this informal system contributed to today's financial crisis. Worse, they fear that its breakdown could turn the looming downturn into something resembling the global depression of the 1930s.

The original Bretton Woods system dates from a conference at a New Hampshire resort hotel in July 1944. Leading British and American economists blamed the Great Depression and, to some extent, World War II on the breakup of the international monetary system in the early 1930s and were determined to create a more stable arrangement in which the dollar would replace the British pound as the accepted global currency. The new system, devised by economists Harry Dexter White and John Maynard Keynes, fixed the dollar's value at $35 for an ounce of gold. National governments, rather than speculators, were to set the value of their currencies in relation to the dollar and would have to disclose any changes in advance to the new International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The dollar became the accepted medium of international exchange and a universal reserve currency. If countries accumulated more dollars than they could possibly use, they could always exchange them with the United States for gold. But, with the United States consistently running a large trade surplus—meaning that countries always needed to have dollars on hand to buy American goods—there was initially little danger of a run on the U.S. gold depository.

Bretton Woods began to totter during the Vietnam war, when the United States was sending billions of dollars abroad to finance the war and running a trade deficit while deficit spending at home sparked inflation in an overheated economy. Countries began trying to swap overvalued dollars for deutschmarks, and France and Britain prepared to cash in their excess dollars at Fort Knox. In response, President Richard Nixon first closed the gold window and then demanded that Western Europe and Japan agree to new exchange rates, whereby the dollar would be worth less gold, and the yen and the deutschmark would be worth more relative to the dollar. That would make U.S. exports cheaper and Japanese and West German imports more expensive, easing the trade imbalance and stabilizing the dollar.

By imposing a temporary tariff, Nixon succeeded in forcing these countries to revalue, but not in creating a new system of stable exchange rates. Instead, the values of the currencies began to fluctuate. And, as inflation soared in the late 1970s, the system, which still relied on the dollar as the universal currency, seemed ready to explode into feuding currencies.

That's when a new monetary arrangement began to emerge. Economists often refer to it as "Bretton Woods II"—not to be confused with the name given this weekend's gathering—but it was not the result of a conference or concerted agreement among the world's major economic powers. Instead, it evolved out of a set of individual decisions—first by the United States, Japan, and Saudi Arabia, and later by the United States and other Asian countries, notably China.

Bretton Woods II took shape during Ronald Reagan's first term. To combat inflation, Paul Volcker, the chairman of the Federal Reserve, jacked interest rates above 20 percent. That precipitated a steep recession—unemployment exceeded 10 percent in the fall of 1982—and large budget deficits as government expenditures grew faster than tax revenues. The value of the dollar also rose as other countries took advantage of high U.S. interest rates. That jeopardized U.S. exports, and the U.S. trade deficit grew even larger, as Americans began importing underpriced goods from abroad while foreigners shied away from newly expensive U.S. products. The Reagan administration faced a no-win situation: Try reducing the trade deficit by reducing the budget deficit, and you'd stifle growth; but try stimulating the economy by increasing the deficit, and you'd have to keep interest rates high in order to sell an adequate amount of Treasury debt, which would also stifle growth. At that point, Japan, along with Saudi Arabia and other OPEC nations, came to the rescue.

At the end of World War II, Japan had adopted a strategy of economic growth that sacrificed domestic consumption in order to accumulate surpluses that it could invest in export industries—initially labor-intensive industries like textiles, but later capital-intensive industries like automobiles and steel. This export-led approach was helped in the 1960s by an undervalued yen, but, after the collapse of Bretton Woods, Japan was threatened by a cheaper dollar. To keep exports high, Japan intentionally held down the yen's value by carefully controlling the disposition of the dollars it reaped from its trade surplus with the United States. Instead of using these to purchase goods or to invest in the Japanese economy or to exchange for yen, it began to recycle them back to the United States by purchasing companies, real estate, and, above all, Treasury debt.

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That investment in Treasury bills, bonds, and notes—coupled with similar purchases by the Saudis and other oil producers, who needed to park their petrodollars somewhere—freed the United States from its economic quandary. With Japan's purchases, the United States would not have to keep interest rates high in order to attract buyers to Treasury securities, and it wouldn't have to raise taxes in order to reduce the deficit. As far as historians know, Japanese and American leaders never explicitly agreed that Tokyo would finance the U.S. deficit or that Washington would allow Japan to maintain an undervalued yen and a large trade surplus. But the informal bargain—described brilliantly in R. Taggart Murphy's *The Weight of the Yen*—became the cornerstone of a new international economic arrangement.

Over the last 20 years, the basic structure of Bretton Woods II has endured, but new players have entered the game. As *Financial Times* columnist Martin Wolf recounts in his new book, *Fixing Global Finance*, Asian countries, led by China, adopted a version of Japan's strategy for export-led growth in the mid-'90s after the financial crises that wracked the continent. They maintained trade surpluses with the United States; and, instead of exchanging their dollars for their own currencies or investing them internally, they, like the Japanese, recycled them into T-bills and other dollar-denominated assets. This kept the value of their currencies low in relation to the dollar and perpetuated the trade surplus by which they acquired the dollars in the first place. By June 2008, China held more than $500 billion in U.S. Treasury debt, second only to Japan. East Asia's central banks had become the post–Bretton Woods equivalent of Fort Knox.

Until recently, there have been clear upsides to this bargain for the United States: the avoidance of tax increases, growing wealth at the top of the income ladder, and preservation of the dollar as the international currency. Without Bretton Woods II, it is difficult to imagine the United States being able to wage wars in Iraq and Afghanistan while simultaneously cutting taxes. For their part, China and other Asian countries enjoyed almost a decade free of financial crises; and the world economy benefited from low transaction costs and relative price stability from having a single currency that countries could use to buy and sell goods.

But there have been downsides to Bretton Woods II. Often noted was how the accumulation of dollars in foreign hands—particularly those of a potential adversary like China—threatens America's freedom of action. A hostile nation could blackmail the United States by threatening to cash in its dollars. Of course, if a nation like China actually began to unload its dollars, it would jeopardize its own financial standing as much as it would jeopardize America's. But economists Brad Setser and Nouriel Roubini argue that even the implicit threat of dumping dollars—or of ceasing to purchase them—could limit U.S. maneuverability abroad. "The ability to send a 'sell' order that roils markets may not give China a veto over U.S. foreign policy, but it surely does increase the cost of any U.S. policy that China opposes," they write.

To date, however, that strategic impact has been chiefly theoretical. The more tangible drawbacks of Bretton Woods II have been social and economic. Bretton Woods II has perpetuated the U.S. trade deficit, particularly in manufactured goods. Forced to compete against foreign products kept cheap not only by low wages abroad but by the dollar's high value, U.S. manufacturers have had little incentive to expand or even retain their operations in the United States. Since the early '80s, the United States has lost about five million manufacturing jobs. True, the United States has gained some highly skilled manufacturing jobs, but most of the lost jobs have been replaced by low-wage service sector employment. This has been a factor in creating a U.S. workforce with an overpaid financial sector at one extreme and a sprawling low-wage service sector at the other.

In Japan, China, and other Asian countries, there has been a similar downside to the grand bargain. The surplus dollars gained from trade with the United States have not been used to raise the standard of living, but rather have been squirreled away in Treasury securities—"sterilized" is the technical term. Writes Wolf, "China has about 800 million poor people, yet the country now consumes less than half of GDP and exports capital to the rest of the world." In an odd way, the contrast between the concentration of new wealth in China's coastal cities and the grating poverty of its countryside has mirrored the contrast between the lavish lifestyle of the Wall Street wizard and the plight of immigrant and illegal-immigrant workers in America's barrios.

Of more immediate concern, Bretton Woods II contributed to the current financial crisis by facilitating the low interest rates that fueled the housing bubble. Here's how it happened: In 2001, the United States suffered a mild recession largely as a result of overcapacity in the telecom and computer industries. The recession would have been much more severe, but, because foreigners were willing to buy Treasury debt, the Bush administration was able to cut taxes and increase spending even as the Federal Reserve lowered interest rates to 1 percent. The economy barely recovered over the next four years. Businesses, still worried about overcapacity, remained reluctant to invest. Instead, they paid down debt, purchased their own stock, and held cash. Banks and other financial institutions, wary of the stock market since the dot-com bubble burst, invested in mortgage-backed securities and other derivatives.

The anemic economic recovery was driven by growth in consumer spending. Real wages actually fell, but consumers increasingly went into debt, spending more than they earned. Encouraged by low interest rates—along with the new subprime deals—consumers bought houses, driving up their prices. The "wealth effect" created by these housing purchases further sustained consumer demand and led to a housing bubble. When housing prices began to fall, the bubble burst, and consumer demand and corporate investment ground to a halt. The financial panic quickly spread not only from mortgage-backed securities to other kinds of derivatives but also from the United States to other countries, chiefly in Europe, that had purchased these American financial products.

And that's not all. As American demand for Chinese exports has stopped growing, China's economy has begun to suffer. Roubini has argued that, if China's export-dependent growth drops from 12 percent to 5 or 6 percent per year, China will be unable to provide jobs to the 24 million new workers that join the labor force each year. China would experience the equivalent of a recession, with repercussions throughout Asia. More importantly for the United States, China would no longer have the surplus dollars to prop up the market for U.S. Treasury bills. The Obama administration could, of course, reduce its dependence on China by reducing the budget deficit, but doing that now would deepen the recession, as well as preventing the new president from pursuing many of his domestic initiatives.

The consequences could be even more dire. In the past, countries in recession could count on countries with growing economies to provide outlets for their exports and investments. The hope this time is that economic growth

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in Asia and particularly China can backstop a U.S. and European recession. But, as a result of Bretton Woods II, prosperity in the United States is intertwined with prosperity in Asia. China depends on exports to the United States, and the United States depends on capital from China. If that special economic relationship breaks down, as it seems to be doing, it could lead to a global recession that could morph into the first depression since the 1930s.

Economists and Treasury officials might dispute specific parts of this analysis, but the bulk of it is neither original nor controversial. For the last three years, if not longer, Bernanke, former Treasury secretary Larry Summers, Roubini, Setser, Wolf, and other economists have been making similar points. Their concerns did not penetrate the presidential campaign, but the Obama administration will have to address the breakdown of Bretton Woods II in January, if not earlier. Wrote Summers this August, "The next administration faces the prospect of having to make the most consequential international economic policy choices in a generation at a time when the confidence of governments in free markets is being increasingly questioned."

In making these choices, policymakers have to recognize that, while Bretton Woods II is not the product of an international agreement, it is not a "free market" system that relies on floating currencies, either. Rather, it is sustained by specific national policies. The United States has acquiesced in large trade deficits—and their effect on the U.S. workforce—in exchange for foreign funding of our budget deficits. And Asia has accepted a lower standard of living in exchange for export-led growth and a lower risk of currency crises.

Some of the policies that Obama championed during the presidential campaign can help move us to a new system—as long as they are not seen merely as temporary palliatives to get the United States out of a recession. These steps include public investments that would make U.S. industries more competitive; subsidies under strict conditions to U.S. automobile manufacturers; and the encouragement of new "green" industries. (By contrast, Obama's principal proposal—a tax cut for the middle class—would not necessarily improve America's economic standing.)

But China, Japan, and other Asian countries—either on their own or with prodding from the new administration—will also have to play a part. Indeed, China may have already begun to do so by announcing a $586 billion stimulus plan of public investment in housing, transportation, and infrastructure. If China plows its trade surplus back into its domestic economy, it will increase demand for imports and put upward pressure on the yuan, reducing China's trade surplus with the West.

This kind of adjustment—in which the United States commits itself to reducing its trade deficit and China, Japan, and other Asian countries abandon their strategy of export-led growth—is what many American policymakers favor. But there is also growing sentiment, particularly in Europe, that beyond these measures, the world's leading economies have to agree on a new international monetary system—or at least dramatically reform the existing one. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has explicitly called for a "new Bretton Woods—building a new international financial architecture for the years ahead." Brown would strengthen the IMF so it functions as "an early warning system and a crisis prevention mechanism for the whole world." He would also have it or a new organization monitor cross-border financial transactions. French President Nicolas Sarkozy would go further, replacing the dollar as the single international currency. "The time when we had a single currency, one line to be followed, that era is over," he declares.

Brown's proposals for regulatory reform make sense and are likely to be considered in the new Obama administration, but Sarkozy's are premature. The dollar isn't going anywhere in the short term. The euro has little presence in Asia; and the Chinese don't want the yen to dominate Asia, let alone the world. The current crisis has, if anything, strengthened the dollar as the least untrustworthy of global currencies.

But adjustments to the dollar's role are certainly needed. The era of the dollar may not be over, but the special conditions under which it reigned during the last decades are being dashed on the rocks of the current recession and financial crisis. In the worst case, the system could descend into chaos, as it did in the 1930s. More likely a new Bretton Woods (call it "III") will emerge, but the question will be whether it does so willy-nilly, as its predecessor did, and invite repeated crises, or whether, like the original Bretton Woods, it will be the product of deliberate agreement and lay the basis for stable growth. Which it is will depend a good deal on the choices the new Obama administration makes. ◆

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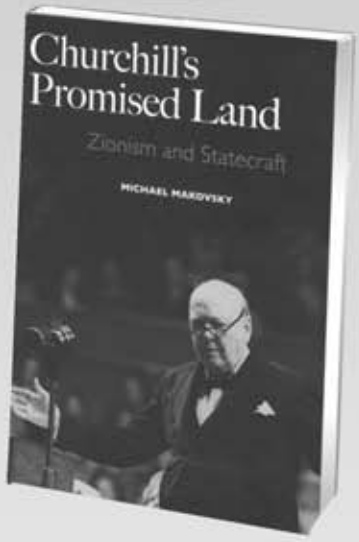

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Bailout

The redemption of Barney Frank.

MICHELLE COTTLE

Barney Frank simply would not shut up. On the afternoon of September 25, the chairman of the House Financial Services Committee was holed up in the White House Cabinet Room with a dozen or so government officials laboring to hammer out a rescue package for the flailing financial markets. Those gathered around the grand mahogany table included the president and vice president, the House speaker and Senate majority leader, the ranking Republicans of both chambers, the Treasury secretary, the Fed chairman, and the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees. Frank was on hand at the insistence of his party's leaders, who had been relying heavily on him since the crisis erupted.

In the presence of such august company, a less confident man might have been intimidated into silence or at least decorous deference. Not Frank. He kept jumping in, quizzing Bush officials and pressing Republican legislators on their objections to the proposal. When John McCain rambled vaguely about the need to alter the package, Frank cut in to demand: "Like what?" As the senator finished, Frank huffed, "I *still* don't know what your proposals are." Similarly, when House Minority Leader John Boehner argued for changes, Frank snapped at him to be more specific. ("Like what?" was a common Frank refrain, say those in attendance.) At one point, recall multiple observers, President Bush felt compelled to remind the congressman that White House protocol calls for participants to wait until the president recognizes them before speaking. Unfazed, Frank resumed his prodding and prying. "It didn't affect me," the chairman later explained with a shrug (though he recalls the chiding coming from someone other than Bush). "I wasn't there because he wanted me to be there. I was there because he knew he couldn't leave me out."

While (characteristically) immodest, Frank's observation is also (characteristically) spot on. The 68-year-old congressman may be imperious, antisocial, and abrasive—President Bush's nickname for him is "Sabertooth"—yet, these days, he is also indispensable. In recent weeks, as financial markets around the world melted down, Frank has found himself in frequent consultation not only with his party leadership and caucus, but also with top Bush officials and major players on Wall Street. His bespectacled, Droopy-Dog mug has been all over the news, cementing him as the public face of Washington's efforts to cope with the chaos. (He recently told his swarm of press stalkers that he now knows how Britney Spears feels.) Meanwhile, conservatives have gone after Frank—long a favorite target—with renewed vigor, both blaming him for the current disaster and attempting to knot the controversial rescue package around his neck. Back home in Massachusetts's fourth district—which stretches from the suburbs south of Boston to the western edge of Cape Cod—Frank felt moved to run TV ads for this election cycle, something he normally doesn't bother with. (He won with 68 percent of the vote.)

For much of his early career, Frank seemed destined for exactly this sort of role. During the 1980s, he was a rising star in Washington—a young, Harvard-educated crusader with a gift for debate and a wicked wit frequently deployed against those who annoyed him. Named "Best Freshman Member of 1981," he was assumed to be headed for party leadership. Even after coming out as gay in 1987, he continued to shine, becoming a popular media presence back before everyone was a talking head. But, in 1989, the ride ended in a swirl of lurid accusations involving a male prostitute Frank had once dated. Miraculously, the congressman survived, eventually regaining some prominence as a liberal firebrand. His image and his career, however, never wholly recovered.

Today, Frank finds himself at the center of a crisis that few of his peers fully understand. And he has emerged as a legislative wise man through a blend of intellect and political savvy. Even his legendary crabbiness has proved an asset of sorts. As a Bloomberg.com story recently noted, "Frank has met his moment." Nearly 20 years after his fall from grace, Barney Frank is finally getting a shot at redemption.

Steve Adamske, communications director for the House Financial Services Committee, settled onto the slightly shabby sofa in the reception area outside the chairman's office in the Rayburn House Office Building. It was Columbus Day, and the warren was jarringly quiet. "You've interviewed him before, right?" Adamske asked, looking vaguely anxious. "On the phone, yeah," I told him. "Why?" "Nothing," he soothed. "I just like to prep reporters who've never interviewed him." Barney Frank, Adamske reminded me, does not do small talk. Period. Indeed, he eschews most norms of polite social interaction. ("He's not much for schmoozing," understates retired Representative Mike Oxley, Frank's predecessor as head of Financial Services.) Allergic to having his time wasted, the chairman barks at reporters and staffers to stop asking stupid questions or to take notes faster—no small challenge considering that Frank is a rapid-fire talker who, despite childhood elocution lessons, still tends to mumble as though his cheeks are stuffed with cotton balls. And pity the poor lawmaker who dares speechify on his watch. (Frank once dressed down Republican Tom DeLay for interrupting him on the House floor to *agree* with him.)

I assured Adamske I knew the drill. "No chit-chat," I vowed, reviewing my queries with an eye toward minimalism.

Frank is not only aware of his fearsome reputation, he encourages it. As I was ushered into his stately, surprisingly uncluttered office, the chairman—gray hair rumpled, white shirt-collar unbuttoned, tie undone and draped loosely around his neck—didn't bother greeting me or even looking up from the massive desk at which he sat fiddling with mail. I took a breath to (with absolutely no preamble) ask my first question, only to have Frank raise a finger, mumble something, and proceed to make a phone call. All through the interview, Frank squirmed in his chair, tugged at his tie, and scratched his nose. At one point, he yawned noisily in mid-sentence. And the moment we finished with my last question, he dropped his head,

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Does the free market corrode moral character?

Not at all.

There is little consensus on what is moral, let alone on what corrodes morality. A man of faith measures moral character by one's ability to abide by the demands of his God. A socialist might measure moral strength by one's dedication to the redistribution of wealth. A liberal —by which I mean a classical,

Adam Smith or Milton Friedman liberal, not a liberal in its American meaning of "pro-big government"—might be religious, and he might see the merits of income equality, but he will always put freedom first. This is the moral framework to which I subscribe.

According to this school of thought, freedom of the individual is the highest aim, and the ultimate test of a person's character is his ability to pursue his own chosen goals in life without infringing upon the freedom of others to pursue their own goals. From this perspective, free economic activity among individuals, corporations, and nations boosts such desirable qualities as trust, honesty, and hard work. Producers are compelled to continually improve their goods and services. The free market establishes a meritocracy and creates opportunities for better jobs for those students who work hard at school. The same mechanism pushes parents to invest more time and money in the education of their children. Producers invest in research and innovation to beat their competitors in the marketplace…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Born in Somalia, Ayaan Hirsi Ali emigrated in 1992 to the Netherlands, where she served as a member of parliament from 2003 to 2006. She is the author of the bestseller Infidel *and a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.*

Yes, but…

other systems are worse. The free market is a crucible of competition that can bring out the basest in human nature. Competition is fierce, and when survival is at stake, there is no room for morality. But, to paraphrase Churchill, for all its flaws, the free market is still superior to all the other economic arrangements that have been tried.

At first it seems obvious that a system based entirely on self-interest would lead to the moral decay of the individual.

If you pause momentarily to aid your brother during your struggle to reach the top—to beat your competitors, to maximize earnings, to buy a bigger house—you will be surpassed by those without such qualms. How, in a truly free market, can there exist consideration for the good of one's fellow man?…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Former world chess champion Garry Kasparov is a leader of the pro-democracy coalition The Other Russia. He is the author of a book on decision-making, How Life Imitates Chess, *and speaks to business audiences worldwide. He lives in Moscow.*

We'd rather not know.

Most of us are consumers who try to get the best possible deals in the market. Most of us are also moral beings who try to do the right things in our communities and societies. Unfortunately, our market desires often conflict with our moral commitments. So how do we cope with this conflict? All too often, we avoid it. We would rather the decisions we make as consumers not reflect upon our moral characters. That way we don't have to make uncomfortable choices between the products and services we want and the ideals to which we aspire.

For example, when the products we want can be made most cheaply overseas, the best deals we can get in the marketplace may come at the expense of our own neighbors' jobs and wages…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Robert B. Reich is professor of public policy at the University of California at Berkeley. He has published twelve books on public policy and has served in three national administrations, most recently as secretary of labor under President Bill Clinton.

No, on balance.

In matters of morality, the free market functions like an amplifier. By placing more wealth and resources at our disposal, it tends to boost and accentuate whatever character tendencies we already possess.

The net result is usually favorable. Most people want a good life for themselves and for their families and friends, and such desires form a part of positive moral character. Markets make it possible for vast numbers of people, at every level of society, to strive for and achieve these common human ends.

Other features of the free market also encourage the better angels of our nature and discourage our destructive impulses. People who are good at cooperating with others tend to be better money-makers, for instance…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Tyler Cowen is Holbert C. Harris Professor of Economics and director of the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. His latest book is Discover Your Inner Economist, *and he blogs at www.marginalrevolution.com.*

It all depends.

The answer depends completely on what kind of market we are talking about and what we mean by "moral character." Today's supposedly "free market"

could be described more accurately as a "fettered" market. Our financial and corporate regimes fall well short of the classic assumptions of perfect

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structure, perfect competition, and perfect information.

In the first edition of *Economics: An Introductory Analysis*, a textbook that I read during my sophomore year at Princeton in 1948, the Nobel laureate Paul Samuelson aptly summed up the issue: "the problem with perfect competition is what George Bernard Shaw once said of Christianity: 'the only trouble with it is that it's never been tried.'"

Another Nobel laureate, Joseph E. Stiglitz, has been even tougher on the recent failures of the free market…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

John C. Bogle is founder and former CEO of Vanguard and president of the Bogle Financial Markets Research Center. His many books include The Little Book of Common Sense Investing *and* Enough: True Measures of Money, Business, and Life, *which will be published this fall.*

Certainly. Or does it?

It is clear that the ferocious competition of interests and passions, the mad rule of money, and materialism as the measure of all things — in short, the free market, released from all rules and governed only by the greed of the most powerful — fatally corrodes our souls. This is what the great Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn thought at the end of his life.

This view was shared by the family of French thinkers of the 1930s called the "non-conformists," which included Charles Péguy and a few others. They saw commodity exchange as a source of depersonalization. It was also the thesis of an entire group of Christian (or simply spiritualist) thinkers who saw in the idea of the "free market" the death of moral values and the end of man's faith and aspiration to the absolute.

It was also — and this should put us on alert — one of the main themes of fascism and one of the reasons the masses were seduced by it. "Stop materialism!" it was proclaimed. "Put an end to destructive individualism and the social atomization against which fascism presents its good, safe, organic, and natural communities!" In short, watch out for the rule of "generalized equivalence" among human values (another term for the "market"), which the fascisms of every age have found anathema…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Bernard-Henri Lévy, the French philosopher, has written more than thirty books, including the New York Times *bestseller* American Vertigo *(2006) and, most recently,* Left in Dark Times: A Stand Against the New Barbarism *(2008), both published by Random House.*

No.

Over the past several centuries, the world has seen the many ways in which an active free market spurs material and social progress while at the same time strengthening moral character. By contrast, people who have lived under the free market's primary modern rival, the ideologically-driven planned economy of state socialism, have suffered as economic performance stagnated, civil society withered, and morality was corroded. In recent decades, as planned economies collapsed under their own contradictions, this utopian experiment has proved to be a systematic failure. Citizens who had endured long years of economic, moral, and political disaster were eager to get rid of them.

Of course, the market economy is not a perfect system. But the market's flaws stem from the actions and motivations of its human participants rather than from its design. Experience has taught us that a free market is closely associated with a free society. And in free societies, people are better able to act in concert to improve their lives. Free societies afford people the opportunity to make their own political and social systems more just. In general, these activities support rather than corrode morality.

From a comparative historical perspective, we tend to define the market as an all-encompassing socioeconomic system, covering economic institutions, social relations, and culture…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Qinglian He is a Chinese economist and a former senior editor of the Shenzhen Legal Daily. *She is the author of* The Pitfalls of Modernization: The Economic and Social Problems of Contemporary China *and* The Fog of Censorship: Media Control in China.

Of course it does.

Competition in the market puts people under great pressure to break the ordinary rules of decent conduct and then to produce good reasons for doing so. It is these rationalizations — the endless self-deception necessary to meet the bottom line and still feel okay about it — that corrode moral character. But this isn't in itself an argument against the free market. Think about the ways that democratic politics also corrodes moral character. Competition for political power puts people under great pressure — to shout lies at public meetings, to make promises they can't keep, to take money from shady characters, to compromise principles that shouldn't be compromised. All this has to be defended somehow, and moral character doesn't survive the defense — at least, it doesn't survive intact. But these obvious flaws don't constitute an argument against democracy.

To be sure, economic and political competition also produce cooperative projects of many different sorts — partnerships, companies, parties, unions…

CONTINUED ONLINE.

Michael Walzer is professor emeritus in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. He is a contributing editor of the New Republic, *co-editor of* Dissent, *and the author, most recently, of* Thinking Politically.

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mumbled "Thank you," and began scribbling away. Translation: *You got what you came for, now get out.*

Journalists are not the only ones prepped for their encounters with Frank. Incoming staffers are warned that the chairman isn't the sort of warm and fuzzy boss who'll be asking after the family, while lobbying shops advise new hires and clients headed in to talk with Frank to skip the windup, come armed with data, and make sure they are ready to defend their position. "Having a conversation with Barney is like delivering oral arguments in front of the Supreme Court," says former Republican representative Steve Bartlett, who served with Frank on Financial Services when it was still the Banking Committee and now lobbies him as head of the Financial Services Roundtable. He elaborates, "An attorney can get three minutes into his prepared statement when one of the justices will shut him off and say, 'Get to the point.' I'm not sure Barney gives you three minutes." And, whatever you do, cautions a lobbyist for another trade group, avoid clichés. "We *never* let anyone going in to talk with him use the phrase 'level playing field,' " he stresses. "The chairman's canned response to that is, 'Everybody is always coming in here looking for a level playing field tilted in their favor.' " Of Frank's famed impatience, Jim Segel, special counsel to the chairman and a Frank friend from Harvard, allows, "It's sometimes a defense so that people won't ask him for things."

This is not to question the authenticity of his pugilistic persona. Frank has been an in-your-face guy for as long as anyone can recall—including his older sister, veteran Democratic operative Ann Lewis. "You'll notice I do not start with patience as one of his virtues," quips Lewis. This may be partly genetic—Frank's mother, Elsie, was reputedly quite the firecracker—and partly the product of growing up a pudgy, lisping, closeted Jewish kid in a Catholic corner of Bayonne, New Jersey, a blue-collar ethnic enclave just south of Jersey City. The second of four children, Barney was raised comfortably but not poshly. His dad, a high school dropout, ran a truck stop along the New Jersey Turnpike, where Barney spent his summers pumping gas. Complicating Barney's formative years, his father served time for refusing to testify against Barney's uncle in a bribery case. Under such conditions, an "awkward" boy (as Elsie once gently described her son) either got tough or spent his youth cowering in a corner waiting to have the snot kicked out of him. Barney has never been one to cower.

At Harvard, Frank was known as a formidable debater. Segel, who was an undergraduate there while Frank was working on his Ph.D., recalls his old friend constantly embroiled in political arguments in the dining room. "He was a dominant intellectual presence at Harvard in the government department," says Segel. But Frank never completed his doctorate. Instead, he went to work on Kevin White's 1967 campaign for mayor of Boston, then served as White's top aide until 1971. After a half-hearted stab at resuming his studies, Frank fled Harvard for the Washington offices of Massachusetts Representative Michael Harrington. At the time, Frank assumed elective office was not an option for him personally because he was gay. But, when the state rep from Boston's Back Bay area retired in 1972, he couldn't resist a run.

In the statehouse, Frank's fame as a liberal scrapper grew, fed by his battles with Governor Michael Dukakis. Even then he had a way with one-liners, once grousing that trying to help Dukakis get his agenda through the legislature without patronage was like "pimping for a nun." Frank's strong opinions and acid tongue made him popular with the press but not so much with colleagues. His assaults left enough scars that, soon after Frank ascended to Congress in 1980, the state legislature moved to redistrict him out of a job. For his 1982 reelection campaign, Frank was thrown up against Margaret Heckler, a popular, eight-term GOP moderate—whose old district made up 70 percent of the new fourth district. The Reagan White House flagged Heckler's race as one of its top priorities, and *Newsweek* called the contest an "uphill" battle for Frank. When the underdog freshman pulled out a win, delivering an embarrassing blow to the White House, his stock soared.

Post-reelection, Frank became less uptight about his private life, attending gay pride events and revealing his sexuality to select friends. In 1986, the façade cracked further when Frank was semi-outed in an autobiography by Robert Bauman—a gay former congressman who had lost his seat in a sex scandal allegedly involving a minor—that made passing reference to Frank's homosexuality. Prior to the book's release, Frank alerted a few people to his secret, most notably Speaker Tip O'Neill. As the story goes, O'Neill threw an arm around Frank and said, "I'm sorry to hear that." When Frank asked why, O'Neill explained, "I thought you were going to be the first Jewish Speaker." Frank ducked the flurry of press inquiries generated by Bauman's book, refusing to discuss his personal life. In May 1987, however, he decided to give his story to *The Boston Globe*. The initial sense was that, politically speaking, he had shot himself in the foot.

Yet, confounding expectations once again, Frank seemed to thrive after his admission. Profiles were written of the (slightly) kinder, gentler Barney. Friends and colleagues talked about how he seemed more at ease. The congressman even admitted the relief of allowing himself a real personal life, though he had limited patience for self-analysis. (Shortly after coming out, he brushed back a *Washington Post* reporter's questions about the angst of life in the closet this way: "Who wants to know that? Do they want to be eating breakfast worrying about the inner emotional turmoil of a middle-aged politician? Let them tape 'Dynasty' instead.") Meanwhile, back in the fourth district, with its pockets of Catholic and blue-collar voters, people seemed largely uninterested in Frank's sexuality, returning him comfortably to office in 1988. In the first half of 1989, as Congress obsessed itself with the ethics investigation of then-Speaker Jim Wright, Frank was still being mentioned as a possible candidate to fill one of the posts that would open up (whip, perhaps) if Wright's departure sparked a leadership shuffle.

But, in August 1989, Frank's rise came to an abrupt halt when a male hustler named Stephen Gobie went public with a jaw-dropping tale. Gobie and Frank had hooked up in 1985 through a sex ad placed by Gobie in a local paper—a first "date" that cost Frank $80. The two men became involved, and Frank, looking to help Gobie straighten out his life, hired the younger man to be his housekeeper and driver. Gobie promptly began running a prostitution ring out of Frank's apartment, until Frank kicked him out in 1987. It was the kind of scandal that normally ends a public career. Frank, however, refused to resign. He apologized for his stupidity on the House floor and held a press conference to address Gobie's claims (including the assertion that Frank had given his blessing to the sex-for-hire service—a charge the congressman staunchly denied).

In the end, the House ethics committee found Frank to have been unaware of any criminal activities, the House voted for a reprimand, and, in November 1990, Frank won reelection with around 65 percent of the vote. Still, the basic facts of the scandal were plenty damaging. And, just like that, one of the

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Democrats' leading lights found himself an object of national ridicule, no longer famous so much as infamous. Frank went into a deep funk, worrying both friends and family.

Gradually, Frank's feistiness returned, and he reasserted himself as a vocal defender of civil liberties and minority rights. The 1994 Republican Revolution further energized his partisan spirit, as Frank applied both intellect and spleen toward thwarting the new majority with arcane procedural maneuvers. He studied not just the basic rules governing House debate but also the 200 years of case law surrounding parliamentary procedure, recalls Robert Raben, who worked as counsel for Frank back then.

So armed, Frank set about making himself a burr in the butt of Republicans—most notably during Bill Clinton's impeachment. Rejecting the push to impeach as partisan excess, he put on a performance in the judiciary committee that *The Washington Post*'s Sally Quinn described as a "tour de force"—with Frank "interjecting procedural questions, leaping on points of order, deftly zinging an opponent, cracking jokes when the atmosphere became particularly poisonous." When Kenneth Starr protested that a Frank query was unfair, the congressman retorted, "Mr. Starr, you're the expert on unfair questions. If you tell me it's an unfair question, I'll withdraw it."

Still, being a notorious liberal bomb-thrower is a far cry from being an acclaimed legislative leader. And at heart, say colleagues, Frank is a legislative junkie. Recognized by Republicans and Democrats alike as brilliant—for years, he has been voted the brainiest House member in surveys of Hill staffers—he is said to have an impressive grasp of both the policy and political implications of any given bill, with a particular gift for reduction. "He simplifies issues for people," says Scott DeFife, a House leadership aide turned lobbyist. "He'll say, 'Don't worry about all the details of that; this is really about x.' " Colleagues past and present stress that, for all his partisan showmanship, Frank is fair-minded and practical. People point to his committee as the most prolific on the Hill last year, with the chairman shepherding through numerous bills on solidly bipartisan votes—a vastly more exhausting venture than rabble-rousing from the back benches, Frank told me. ("It's easier to get everybody together on 'No.' You all have to have the same reason for 'Yes.' You don't have to have the same reason for 'No.' ") Meanwhile, his eccentricities—such as his refusal to waste time on politeness or personal grooming—serve to reinforce his image as a man of big ideas. (One Democratic staffer describes a last-minute meeting that congressional leadership called on a late September evening with Henry Paulson and key Hill negotiators: "Here comes Barney careening around the corner. Slovenly. Unkempt. His shirt was out, and his zipper was down. . . . It was classic Barney.")

And so, when financial disaster struck and someone needed to rally Democrats (and just enough Republicans) around a controversial bailout, Frank had the intellectual clout to take charge. Lawmakers and industry players alike express relief that Frank was leading the way. "The fact that Barney Frank is chairman of Financial Services and Hank Paulson is Treasury secretary is, as far as individual leadership, probably the only thing keeping the system afloat right now," says the Financial Services Roundtable's Bartlett.

Certainly, Bush would have been hard-pressed to drive his rescue package through Congress without Frank's help. Despite his famed impatience, Frank spent enormous energy explaining the need for the legislation. He also aggressively defended the bill in the press and against colleagues from both sides of the aisle looking to scuttle it. When Boehner suggested that the first bailout vote failed because a dozen members of his caucus had been offended by Speaker Nancy Pelosi's partisan floor speech, Frank spotlighted the absurdity of Boehner's claim at a news conference: "Because somebody hurt their feelings, they decide to punish the country," he jeered. "I'll make an offer. Give me those twelve people's names, and I will go talk uncharacteristically nicely to them and tell them what wonderful people they are, and maybe they'll now think about the country." On occasion, things got a little tense: When, at a Democratic caucus meeting, bailout opponent Brad Sherman snarked that Paulson was just Bush without the hair, Frank delivered a verbal thrashing. But, for the most part, observers say, the chairman kept his frustration in check.

Just as important, Frank had the liberal bona fides to give the rescue bill and its supporters some political cover—a major boon to a package many Americans saw as a bailout for Wall Street fat cats. "That is, I think, a major reason why the bill passed into law, because Barney Frank credentialed it with people who would generally never support something like this," says a grateful Francis Creighton, chief lobbyist for the Mortgage Bankers Association. Here, again, Frank's ornery temperament may have been key. Liberals knew the chairman wasn't going to let himself get rolled. We are, after all, talking about a guy who chews up lobbyists for breakfast and won't even allow the president of the United States to run his own meetings.

It remains to be seen how Frank's abrasive style will play with the incoming president—a member of Frank's political team but not exactly a kindred spirit. While Frank (who supported Hillary Clinton in the primaries) expressed to me appreciation for Barack Obama's intellectual grasp of the current crisis, he mocked the president-elect's self-professed post-partisanship—a condition Frank delights in saying gives him "post-partisan depression." "When he said we shouldn't fight the fights of the '90s, I said, 'Well, what about abortion? Gay rights? Which one do you want me to give up?' " grumped Frank. Just you wait, the chairman told me with a smug semi-smile. The Republicans "will dis-post-partisan him by their actions. We'll re-partisan him!"

Frank is clearly thriving at the center of the whirlwind. Asked about his reputation for braininess, he laughed, brushed away the question with one hand, and insisted he would "defer self-evaluation." For a moment, he looked almost embarrassed and more than a little pleased. He expressed excitement about the opportunity to reshape public policy and evinced zero anxiety about his ability to do so effectively. Every now and again during our (brief!) chat, Frank leaned back in his big swivel chair, arms behind his head—the picture of confidence, if not exactly contentment. It was the look of a man who has indeed met his moment, and perhaps also knows how close he came to never having it.

Of course, Frank rejected the notion that he was even a little energized by the economic plates shifting around him. "I'm tired," he demurred. "I'm sixty-eight years old. I've been doing this for forty years. I think about retiring." I made a skeptical face. This is the sort of empty threat all veteran pols make with the knowledge that you know they're full of crap. As Frank himself admitted, "There's nothing I would give this job up for." (No, not even a Senate run, he insisted.) Still, I couldn't resist skirting small-talk territory by asking what the chairman would do with himself if he left Congress. Frank, unsurprisingly, had a ready quip: "I'd ignore people. I look forward to that." That part, at least, is easy to believe. ◆

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Stanley Kauffmann on Films

PRESIDENTS AND OTHERS

Oliver Stone is, for me, the most adventurous and exciting American director of his time. Struck by some of our era's soul-chilling events and forces, he has seized them with electrifying art. No other American director has so consistently explored large political and social ravages of the day. This is not a matter of civic duty. Stone's best films are, in complex and helpful ways, discomforts.

His new film, *W.*, is about George W. Bush. Among his major films, two have also been on presidential subjects. *JFK* (1991) investigated the murder of that president and was attacked (not unjustly) for historical distortions. But the fact-checkers missed the motive for the picture. Stone believed, along with those who started the investigation, that JFK was killed because he wanted to curtail American involvement in Vietnam. Stone had served there (and had made the best film about it, *Platoon*). He wanted some sort of justice brought to enthusiasts for the Vietnam hell. In any case, his filmic treatment of the matter was breathtaking.

Nixon (1995) is most memorable for the man that Stone and the magnificent Anthony Hopkins created—a man cursed in his composition. With Stone's help, Hopkins fused marvelously Nixon's sullen ambition, foxy intelligence, hobbled abilities, and vindictive sleaze, and then packed the result into a body that seemed uncomfortable with itself. Stone and Hopkins took a thoroughly disliked character and eventually led us to some further understanding of his twisted being and even to a whisper of pity.

Now Stone turns to another generally disliked president. Curiously, there is another link between Nixon and Bush besides public dislike. I have always thought that the crucial Nixon tapes, which finally did him in and which could easily have been destroyed, were preserved because something in his Quaker background was asking for punishment, and thereby a kind of redemption. The story of W. is much more openly a story of religious redemption. All the world knows of Bush's born-again Christianity; but in Stanley Weiser's screenplay, it is the central transforming event. Before Bush's conversion, he is a gluttonous, horny, booze-guzzling rich playboy; after conversion, he stops indulging in food, women, and alcohol. He goes into politics and, electorally at least, he succeeds. The world may not think of Bush as an instance of heavenly enlightenment, but Weiser and Stone present him in such a way that, no matter how much we may despise the current presidency, its divine source is clear.

W.
Lionsgate

STAGES
Lemming Film

Politically and biographically, the film was of course doomed to meagerness. How could a two-hour picture include most of the really relevant material in Bush's earlier and later life, or all the mistakes, evasions, untruths of his administration? We simply cruise through the early life and the White House years with Stone deftly at the helm, latterly touching a number of issues but ending with a tourist's overall take, not with any new insight or even new outrage. What we see, after conversion, is a Bush who is no longer an overgrown college cut-up yet who is far from grave. He conducts the White House as if friendly regular-guy maneuvers with his staff—smiles seen and unseen—were the true stuff of office.

So there is no point in listing here the major political matters that are either ticked off quickly—the subject of torture, for instance—or omitted. The actors who do the deeds, or don't, vary in effect. In Josh Brolin, Stone has found the right actor to embody both the earlier wastrel and the post-conversion president, moderately energetic and resoundingly shallow. Brolin makes this man's presence in the White House seem a caprice of fate that may amuse historians five centuries hence. More troublesome is the treatment of the White House ensemble: these people are only superficially sketched. (Not Laura Bush, sweetly played by Elizabeth Banks.) Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, two men about whom frightful shadows have gathered, are hardly characterized. They might not have revealed at official meetings the matters that we now know about them, but neither could they have been as bland as they are here. Colin Powell is treated so carefully as to become stuffy. Condoleezza Rice just happens to be present at meetings, for no apparent reason.

Yet the film holds us, not just because we keep hoping for some inside peek but because we are watching our own lives being bandied about. Stone knew that if he simply used the skills that are easily his, we would be held because our lives are at stake. Nonetheless, when it is all over, we are left with a looming question. Two related versions of it, in fact. Why did Stone want to make the picture? After the White House tour, all we can think is that we have seen what we already knew, except that now it is strenuously arranged around a religious crux. Why, too, did Stone hasten to get the film released before Election Day? Voters were unlikely to make their

ANTHONY RUSSO

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choices or alter them, one way or another, because of *W.*

Then there is an important question about Stone himself. In some of his best films, *JFK* and *Nixon* and *Natural Born Killers* (which I consider an ignored masterpiece), Stone was not content with linear narrative. He consistently tried to sweep into every sequence matters that pertained but were not seen or heard on the surface. The immediate reminder was of later Joyce, who knew that every second in life contains immensities that cannot be uttered or shown but who kept trying to show them. To lift Stone next to Joyce takes a deep breath, but it is relevant because it scores an element missing in *W.* Yes, there are two fantasy shots of Bush standing on the diamond in a huge empty sports stadium, shots that convey the persistence of boyhood and the hunger for adoration. There is a quasi-Freudian dream scene in the Oval Office with his father, who once worked there, berating W., now the occupant. But generally the film is monodic, not polyphonic. Stone's three most recent pictures, *Any Given Sunday*, *Alexander*, and *World Trade Center*, were intended as mainstream merchandise and don't come under this textural scrutiny. *W.* does.

The last scene of the film is a presidential press conference, in 2004, where a reporter asks Bush what he thinks his greatest mistakes were. As he ponders a reply, the film fades away. Stone himself might face a similar question. One answer could be his abandonment of cinematic richness and possibility. For whatever reason—guesses are out of order—he has trimmed himself. The unique Stone, invaluable in some lasting films, is missing at the moment.

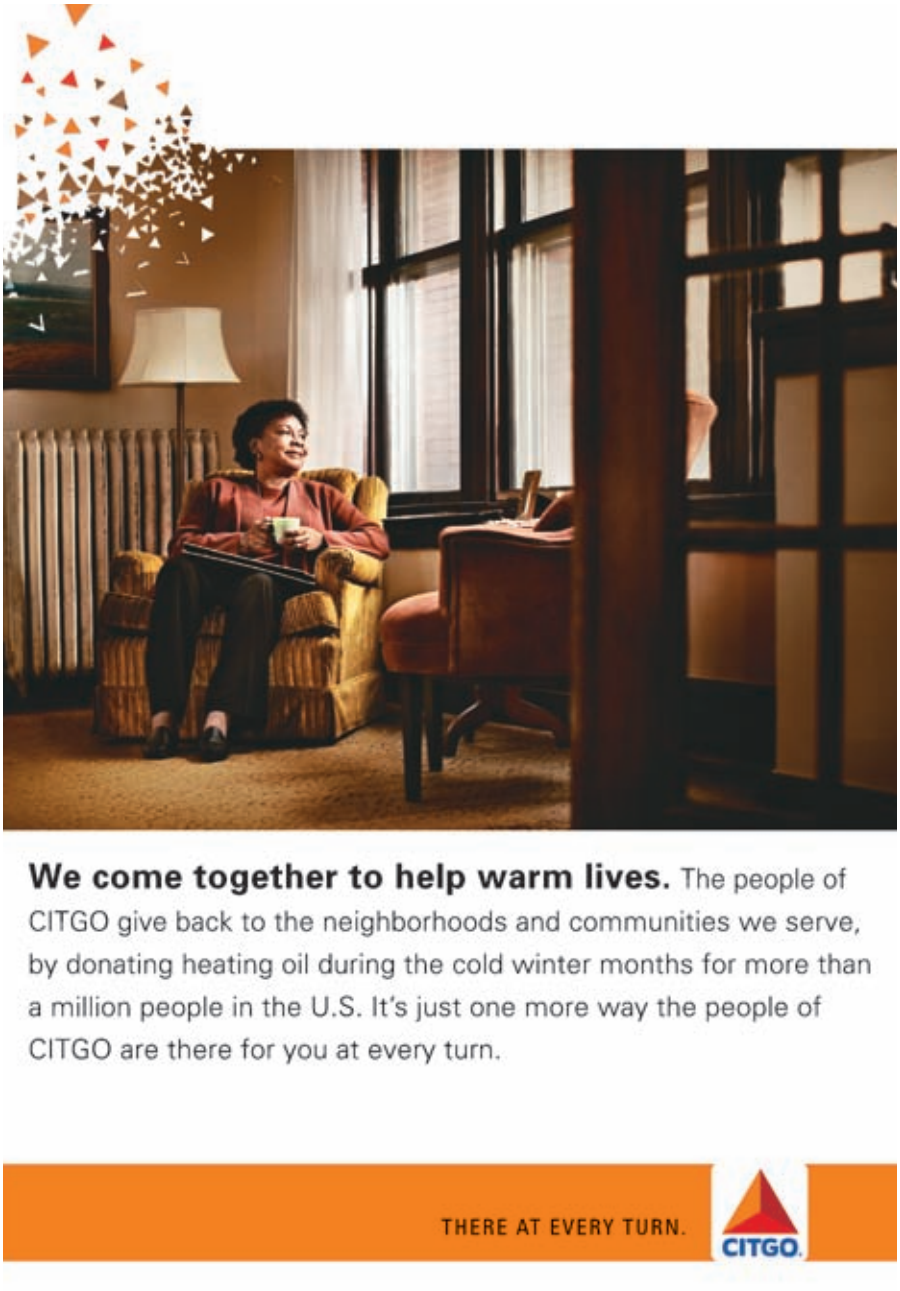
The press tells us that Hollywood is preparing a sequel to *Wall Street* (1987), Stone's probing account of a society that has greed as creed. A sequel? Isn't that superfluous? The sequel to what Stone had to say has come along in reality and is now distributed all around the globe.

A Dutch film called *Stages* consists of eight conversations in eight different restaurants interspersed with silent interludes. Those interludes follow a seventeen-year-old youth, Isaac, as he breaks into strangers' apartments, simply pushes around in them, steals nothing, and leaves; or else he is at home, his door locked, heedless of distant pleas from his mother to open up.

As for the conversations, three of them are between Isaac's parents, a divorced couple named Roos and Martin, and are often about the problem of their aloof son. Roos, with whom the boy lives, is upset; Martin urges her to let the boy work his way through his eremitic phase. The other five conversations are between Roos and a woman friend; Roos and a gay male friend; Roos and her mother, who is moving to Spain to be with her lover; Martin and the gay man, who is also his editor (Martin is a journalist writing a book); and Martin and a girlfriend. The world of Roos and Martin is vividly sketched.

The screenplay is by Jolein Laarman and Mijke de Jong, who directed. De Jong has designed her direction carefully. The table chats are not always friendly but are always animated. The intervals with Isaac are mute, so sound and silence alternate throughout. At those eight tables de Jong mostly focuses on one of the two speakers. In the first chat we become very familiar with Roos's face before we even glimpse Martin. In the two scenes with the gay man, we never really see his face, nor do we see the face of Roos's mother in her conversation about Spain.

The result is, to use a dread word, interesting. De Jong seems to have two ideas in mind. She hopes that by breaking cinematic patterns—of constantly shifting between faces in a conversation—she can bring freshness to familiar family troubles and personal problems. (Both Roos and Martin are dissatisfied with themselves.) Also, in her chatter-silence process, de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Jong lays patterns on the usual untidy currents of people's lives. Of course this is what art often does, but de Jong wants us to see her doing it, and for the duration of this short feature—a Bergman-like eighty minutes—we want it, too.

The film's final two scenes contrast with each other. The first is the last talk between Roos and Martin, on a surprising subject, at the end of which she suggests that they say nothing for a few minutes—and they don't. They just sit there. (Though not for a few minutes.) What then happens and what happens in the very last scene, which is silent, reveal an admission by de Jong: an artist's designs are not always the end of the matter.

The whole film is economical, perhaps in budget terms but chiefly in state of mind. There is never too much of anything. De Jong is patently a director whose main drive is, in a valuable sense, understated novelty. Elsie de Brauw is attractively plain as Roos, her face a kaleidoscope of feelings. Marcel Musters as Martin plays a man who thinks he is being sensible and doesn't know that he is often impossible. As the youth Isaac, Stijn Koomen is meaningfully impassive. He isn't asked to do much more. ◆

Adam Kirsch

THE DEADLY JESTER

IN DEFENSE OF LOST CAUSES
By Slavoj Žižek
(Verso, 504 pp., $34.95)

VIOLENCE
By Slavoj Žižek
(Picador, 272 pp., $14)

I.

Last year the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek published a piece in *The New York Times* deploring America's use of torture to extract a confession from Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the Al Qaeda leader who is thought to have masterminded the attacks of September 11. The arguments that Žižek employed could have been endorsed without hesitation by any liberal-minded reader. Yes, he acknowledged, Mohammed's crimes were "clear and horrifying"; but by torturing him the United States was turning back the clock on centuries of legal and moral progress, reverting to the barbarism of the Middle Ages. We owe it to ourselves, Žižek argued, not to throw away "our civilization's greatest achievement, the growth of our spontaneous moral sensitivity." For anyone who is familiar with Žižek's many books, what was striking about the piece was how un-Žižekian it was. Yes, there were the telltale marks—quotations from Hegel and Agamben kept company with a reference to the television show *24*, creating the kind of high-low frisson for which Žižek is celebrated. But for the benefit of the *Times* readers, Žižek was writing, rather surprisingly, as if the United States was basically a decent country that had strayed into sin.

He was being dishonest. What Žižek really believes about America and torture can be seen in his new book, *Violence*, when he discusses the notorious torture photos from Abu Ghraib: "Abu Ghraib was not simply a case of American arrogance towards a Third World people; in being submitted to humiliating tortures, the Iraqi prisoners were effectively *initiated into American culture*." Torture, far from being a betrayal of American values actually offers "a direct insight into American values, into the very core of the obscene enjoyment that sustains the U.S. way of life." This, to Žižek's many admirers, is more like it.

It also provides a fine illustration of the sort of dialectical reversal that is Žižek's favorite intellectual stratagem, and which gives his writing its disorienting, counterintuitive dazzle. Torture, which appears to be un-American, is pronounced to be the thing that is most American. It follows that the legalization of torture, far from barbarizing the United States, is actually a step toward humanizing it. According to the old Marxist logic, it heightens the contradictions, bringing us closer to the day when we realize, as Žižek writes, that "universal human rights" are an ideological sham, "effectively the rights of white male property owners to exchange freely on the market and exploit workers and women."

Nor does Žižek simply condemn Al Qaeda's violence as "horrifying." Fundamentalist Islam may seem reactionary, but "in a curious inversion," he characteristically observes, "religion is one of the possible places from which one can deploy critical doubts about today's society. It has become one of the sites of resistance." And the whole premise of *Violence*, as of Žižek's recent work in general, is that resistance to the liberal-democratic order is so urgent that it justifies any degree of violence. "Everything is to be endorsed here," he writes in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, "up to and including religious 'fanaticism.'"

The curious thing about the Žižek phenomenon is that the louder he applauds violence and terror—especially the terror of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, whose "lost causes" Žižek takes up in another new book, *In Defense of Lost Causes*—the more indulgently he is received by the academic left, which has elevated him into a celebrity and the center of a cult. A glance at the blurbs on his books provides a vivid illustration of the power of repressive tolerance. In *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*, Žižek claims, "Better the worst Stalinist terror than the most liberal capitalist democracy"; but on the back cover of the book we are told that Žižek is "a stimulating writer" who "will entertain and offend, but never bore." In *The Fragile Absolute*, he writes that "the way to fight ethnic *hatred* effectively is not through its immediate counterpart, ethnic *tolerance*; on the contrary, what we need is *even more hatred*, but proper political hatred"; but this is an example of his "typical brio and boldness." And *In Defense of Lost Causes*, where Žižek remarks that "Heidegger is '*great' not in spite of, but because of* his Nazi engagement," and that "crazy, tasteless even, as it may sound, the problem with Hitler was that *he was not violent enough*, that his violence was not 'essential' enough"; but this book, its publisher informs us, is "a witty, adrenalin-fueled manifesto for universal values."

In the same witty book Žižek laments that "this is how the establishment likes its 'subversive' theorists: harmless gadflies who sting us and thus awaken us to the inconsistencies and imperfections of our democratic enterprise—God forbid that they might take the project seriously and try to *live* it." How is it, then, that Slavoj Žižek, who wants not to correct democracy but to destroy it, has been turned into one of the establishment's pet subversives, who "tries to *live*" the revolution most completely as a jet-setting professor at the European Graduate School, a senior researcher at the University of Ljubljana's Institute of Sociology, and the International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities?

A part of the answer has to do with Žižek's enthusiasm for American popular culture. Despite the best attempts of critical theory to demystify Ameri-

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can mass entertainment, to lay bare the political subtext of our movies and pulp fiction and television shows, pop culture remains for most Americans apolitical and anti-political—a frivolous zone of entertainment and distraction. So when the theory-drenched Žižek illustrates his arcane notions with examples from *Nip/Tuck* and *Titanic*, he seems to be signaling a suspension of earnestness. The effect is quite deliberate. In *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, for instance, he writes that "*Jurassic Park* is a chamber drama about the trauma of fatherhood in the style of the early Antonioni or Bergman." Elsewhere he asks, "Is Parsifal not a model for Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*, with Laurence Fishburne in the role of Gurnemanz?" Those are laugh lines, and they cunningly disarm the anxious or baffled reader with their playfulness. They relieve his reader with an expectation of comic hyperbole, and this expectation is then carried over to Žižek's political proclamations, which are certainly hyperbolic but not at all comic.

When, in 1994, during the siege of Sarajevo, Žižek wrote that "*there is no difference*" between life in that city and life in any American or Western European city, that "it is no longer possible to draw a clear and unambiguous line of separation between us who live in a 'true' peace and the residents of Sarajevo"—well, it was only natural for readers to think that he did not really mean it, just as he did not really mean that *Jurassic Park* is like a Bergman movie. This intellectual promiscuity is the privilege of the licensed jester, of the man whom *The Chronicle of Higher Education* dubbed "the Elvis of cultural theory."

In person, too, Žižek plays the jester with practiced skill. Every journalist who sits down to interview him comes away with a smile on his face. Robert Boynton, writing in *Lingua Franca* in 1998, found Žižek "bearded, disheveled, and loud … like central casting's pick for the role of Eastern European Intellectual." Boynton was amused to see the manic, ranting philosopher order mint tea and sugar cookies: " 'Oh, I can't drink anything stronger than herbal tea in the afternoon,' he says meekly. 'Caffeine makes me too nervous.' " The intellectual parallel is quite clear: in life, as in his writing, Žižek is all bark and no bite. Like a naughty child who flashes an irresistible grin, it is impossible to stay angry at him for long.

I witnessed the same deception a few weeks ago, when Žižek appeared with Bernard-Henri Lévy at the New York Public Library. The two philosopher-

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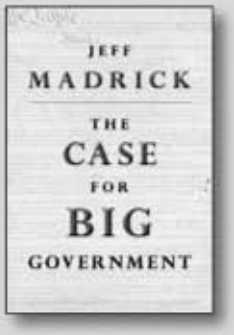

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celebrities came on stage to the theme music from *Superman*, and their personae were so perfectly opposed that they did indeed nudge each other into cartoonishness: Lévy was all the more Gallic and debonair next to Žižek, who seemed all the more wild-eyed and Slavic next to Lévy. Thus it was perfectly natural for the audience to erupt in laughter when Žižek, at one point in the generally unacrimonious evening, told Lévy: "Don't be afraid—when we take over you will not go to the Gulag, just two years of re-education camp." Solzhenitsyn had died only a few weeks earlier, but it would have been a kind of bêtise to identify Žižek's Gulag with Solzhenitsyn's Gulag. When the audience laughed, it was playing into his hands, and hewing to the standard line on Žižek, which Rebecca Mead laid down in a profile of him in *The New Yorker* a few years ago: "Always to take Slavoj Žižek seriously would be to make a category mistake."

II.

Whether or not it would be always a mistake to take Slavoj Žižek seriously, surely it would not be a mistake to take him seriously just once. He is, after all, a famous and influential thinker. So it might be worthwhile to consider Žižek's work as if he means it—to ask what his ideas really are, and what sort of effects they are likely to have.

Žižek is a believer in the Revolution at a time when almost nobody, not even on the left, thinks that such a cataclysm is any longer possible or even desirable. This is his big problem, and also his big opportunity. While "socialism" remains a favorite hate-word for the Republican right, the prospect of communism overthrowing capitalism is now so remote, so fantastic, that nobody feels strongly moved to oppose it, as conservatives and liberal anti-communists opposed it in the 1930s, the 1950s, and even the 1980s. When Žižek turns up speaking the classical language of Marxism-Leninism, he profits from the assumption that the return of ideas that were once the cause of tragedy can now occur only in the form of farce. In the visual arts, the denaturing of what were once passionate and dangerous icons has become commonplace, so that emblems of evil are transformed into perverse fun, harmless but very profitable statements of post-ideological camp; and there is a kind of intellectual equivalent of this development in Žižek's work. The cover of his book *The Parallax View* reproduces a Socialist Realist portrait of "Lenin at the Smolny Institute," in the ironically unironic fashion made familiar by the pseudo-iconoclastic work of Komar and Melamid, Cai Guo-Jiang, and other post-Soviet, post-Mao artists. He, too, expects you to be in on the joke. But there is a difference between Žižek and the other jokesters. It is that he is not really joking.

Like them, Žižek, who was born in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, in 1949, spent his formative years under communism. As an undergraduate, he acquired what would become a lifelong fascination with the work of Jacques Lacan; later he went to Paris to be analyzed by Lacan's son-in-law and heir, Jacques-Alain Miller, and to this day Lacanian ideas and terms form one of the foundations of Žižek's thought. His academic career was evidently sidetracked by communist bureaucrats who believed, no doubt correctly, that his eccentric brilliance would make him politically unreliable. In the 1980s, he was involved in establishing Slovenia's opposition Liberal Democratic Party, and he even ran for office, unsuccessfully, in the newly independent country's elections in 1990. It would be interesting to know more about Žižek's activities in this period, so as to understand how this erstwhile liberal democrat emerged as an idolator of Lenin and a contemptuous foe of liberal democracy.

For if Žižek benefits, practically speaking, from the repudiation of the communist dream, it is also his central grievance. Since he mixes high theory and low culture—one of his books, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, is a primer on Lacan that illustrates his theories with examples from Hollywood movies—it is tempting to classify him as another postmodernist. But Žižek is quite capable of distinguishing between pop culture, which is the air we all breathe, and postmodern relativism, which he unequivocally rejects. His recent work, in fact, is strictly conservative in its hostility to the libertarian and improvisatory aspects of contemporary Western culture. His attitude toward homosexuality, for instance, is that of a mid-century Freudian: he regards it as a symptom of debilitating narcissism. In *Violence*, he suggests that homosexuality is a step on the road to onanism: "first, in homosexuality, the other sex is excluded (one does it with another person of the same sex). Then, in a kind of mockingly Hegelian negation of negation, the very dimension of otherness is cancelled: one does it with oneself." Transsexuals are even more threatening: "The ultimate difference, the 'transcendental' difference that grounds human identity itself, thus turns into something open to manipulation: the ultimate plasticity of being human is asserted instead." When it comes to the brave new world of contemporary bioethics, Žižek is as hidebound as any Catholic traditionalist.

Žižek suspects all these postmodernist twenty-first-century phenomena because his political program is, as he recognizes, a throwback to the political modernism of the twentieth century, with its utopian longing for a violent, total transformation of human society. Only this kind of revolution, he believes, is real politics. More: only in the violence of revolution do we touch reality at all. "The ultimate and defining experience of the twentieth century," he declares, "was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to the everyday social reality—the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality." Žižek, too, feels this longing for the Real, and he recognizes that this puts him in opposition to his times, in which the Virtual does quite nicely. He deplores "one of the great postmodern motifs, that of the Real Thing towards which one should maintain a proper distance." He wants to close that distance, to seize the Real Thing.

It makes sense, then, that the pop-culture artifact that speaks most deeply to Žižek, and to which he returns again and again in his work, is *The Matrix*. In this film, you will remember, the hero, played by Keanu Reeves, is initiated into a terrible secret: the world as we know it does not actually exist, but is merely a vast computer simulation projected into our brains. When the hero is unplugged from this simulation, he finds that the human race has in reality been enslaved by rebellious robots, who use the Matrix to keep us docile while literally sucking the energy from our bodies. When Laurence Fishburne, Reeves's mentor, shows him the true state of the Earth, blasted by nuclear bombs, he proclaims: "Welcome to the desert of the real!"

When Žižek employed this phrase as the title of a short book about the September 11 attacks and their aftermath, he was not making an ironic pop reference. He was drawing an edifying parallel. Why is it, the communist revolutionary must inevitably reflect, that nobody wants a communist revolution? Why do people in the West seem so content in what Žižek calls "the Francis Fukuyama dream of the 'end of history' "? For most of us, this may not seem like a hard question to answer: one need only compare the experience of communist countries with the experience of democratic ones. But Žižek is not an

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empiricist, or a liberal, and he has another answer. It is that capitalism is the Matrix, the illusion in which we are trapped.

This, of course, is merely a flamboyant sci-fi formulation of the old Marxist concept of false consciousness. "Our 'freedoms,'" Žižek writes in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, "themselves serve to mask and sustain our deeper unfreedom." This is the central instance in Žižek's work of the kind of dialectical reversal, the clever anti-liberal inversion, that is the basic movement of his mind. It could hardly be otherwise, considering that his intellectual gods are Hegel and Lacan—masters of the dialectic, for whom reality never appears except in the form of the illusion or the symptom. In both their systems, the interpreter—the philosopher for Hegel, the analyst for Lacan—is granted absolute, unchallengeable authority. Most people are necessarily in thrall to appearances, and thereby to the deceptions of power; but the interpreter is somehow immune to them, and can singlehandedly recognize and expose the hidden meanings, the true processes at work in History or in the Unconscious.

This sacerdotal notion of intellectual authority makes both thinkers essentially hostile to democracy, which holds that the truth is available in principle to everyone, and that every individual must be allowed to speak for himself. Žižek, too, sees the similarity—or, as he says, "the profound solidarity"—between his favorite philosophical traditions. "Their structure," he acknowledges, "is inherently 'authoritarian': since Marx and Freud opened up a new theoretical field which sets the very criteria of veracity, their words cannot be put to the test the same way one is allowed to question the statements of their followers." Note that the term "authoritarian" is not used here pejoratively. For Žižek, it is precisely this authoritarianism that makes these perspectives appealing. Their "engaged notion of truth" makes for "struggling theories, not only theories about struggle."

But to know what is worth struggling for, you need theories about struggle. Only if you have already accepted the terms of the struggle—in Žižek's case, the class struggle—can you move on to the struggling theory that teaches you how to fight. In this sense, Žižek the dialectician is at bottom entirely undialectical. That liberalism is evil and that communism is good is not his conclusion, it is his premise; and the contortions of his thought, especially in his most political books, result from the need to reconcile that premise with a reality that seems abundantly to indicate the opposite.

Hence the necessity of the Matrix, or something like it, for Žižek's worldview. And hence his approval of anything that unplugs us from the Matrix and returns us to the desert of the real—for instance, the horrors of September 11. One of the ambiguities of Žižek's recent work lies in his attitude toward the kind of Islamic fundamentalists who perpetrated the attacks. On the one hand, they are clearly reactionary in their religious dogmatism; on the other hand, they have been far more effective than the Zapatistas or the Porto Alegre movement in discomfiting American capitalism. As Žižek observes, "while they pursue what appear to us to be evil goals with evil means, the very form of their activity meets the highest standard of the good." Yes, the good: Mohammed Atta and his comrades exemplified "good as the spirit of and actual readiness for sacrifice in the name of some higher cause." Žižek's dialectic allows him to have it all: the jihadis are not really motivated by religion, as they say they are; they are actually casualties of global capitalism, and thus "objectively" on the left. "The only way to conceive of what happened on September 11," he writes, "is to locate it in the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism."

III.

'Will America finally risk stepping through the fantasmatic screen that separates it from the Outside World, accepting its arrival in the Real world"? Žižek asked in 2002. The answer was no. Even September 11 did not succeed in robbing the West of its liberal illusions. What remains, then, for the would-be communist? The truly dialectical answer, the kind of answer that Marx would have given, is that the adaptations of capitalism must themselves prove fatally maladaptive. This is the answer that Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt gave in their popular neo-Marxist treatises *Empire* and *Multitude*: as global capitalism evolves into a kind of disembodied, centerless, virtual reality, it makes labor autonomous and renders capital itself unnecessary. But Žižek, in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, has no use for Negri's "heroic attempt to stick to fundamental Marxist coordinates." When it comes to the heart of the matter, what Žižek wants is not dialectic, but repetition: another Robespierre, another Lenin, another Mao. His "progressivism" is not linear, it is cyclical. And if objective conditions are different from what they were in 1789 or 1917, so much the worse for objective conditions. "True ideas are eternal, they are indestructible, they always return every time they are proclaimed dead," Žižek writes in his introduction. One of the sections in the book is titled "Give the dictatorship of the proletariat a chance!"

Of course, Žižek knows as well as anyone how many chances it has been given, and what the results have been. In his recent books, therefore, he has begun to articulate a new rationale for revolution, one that acknowledges its destined failure in advance. "Although, in terms of their positive content, the Communist regimes were mostly a dismal failure, generating terror and misery," he explains, "at the same time they opened up a certain space, the space of utopian expectations." He adds elsewhere: "In spite of (or, rather, *because of*) all its horrors, the Cultural Revolution undoubtedly did contain elements of an enacted utopia." The crimes denoted not the failure of the utopian experiments, but their success. This utopian dimension is so precious that it is worth any number of human lives. To the tens of millions already lost in Russia, China, Cambodia, and elsewhere, Žižek is prepared to add however many more are required. He endorses the formula of the French radical philosopher Alain Badiou: "*mieux vaut un désastre qu'un désêtre*," better a disaster than a lack of being.

This ontology of revolution raises some questions. On several occasions, Žižek describes the "utopian" moment of revolution as "divine." In support of this notion he adduces Walter Benjamin on "divine violence." "The most obvious candidate for 'divine violence,'" he writes in *Violence*, "is the violent explosion of resentment which finds expression in a spectrum that ranges from mob lynchings to revolutionary terror." It is true that Benjamin did, in his worst moments, endorse revolutionary violence in these terms. But for Benjamin, who had a quasi-mystical temperament, the divine was at least a real metaphysical category: when he said divine, he meant divine. For Žižek, who sometimes employs religious tropes but certainly does not believe in religion, "divine" is just an honorific—a lofty way of justifying his call for human sacrifices.

"In the revolutionary explosion as an Event," Žižek explains in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, "another utopian dimension shines through, the dimension of universal emancipation which, precisely, is the excess betrayed by the market reality which takes over 'the day after'—as such, this excess is not simply abolished, dismissed as irrelevant, but, as it were, *trans-*

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posed into the virtual realm." But if utopia is destined to remain virtual—if Robespierre is always followed by Bonaparte, and Lenin by Stalin—why should actual lives be sacrificed to it? Would it not be wiser to seek this "dimension," this "divinity," bloodlessly, outside politics, by means of the imagination?

But what if it is not the utopia that appeals to Žižek, but the blood and the sacrifice? That is certainly the impression he gives with his strange misreading of Benjamin's most famous image. In *Violence*, Žižek cites the passage in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that was inspired by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*:

> This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

The moral sublimity of this image, which has made it a touchstone for so many postwar thinkers, lies in Benjamin's opposition between the violence of history and the ineffectual but tireless witness of the angel. Violence lies in the nature of things, but the angel, who is the always-imminent messiah, resists this nature absolutely: his one desire is to "make whole what has been smashed." Yet here is Žižek's response to Benjamin: "And what if divine violence is the wild intervention of this angel?" What if "from time to time he strikes back to restore the balance, to enact a revenge"? Benjamin's point could not be more completely traduced: if the angel struck back, he would no longer be the angel. He would have gone over to the side of the "progress" that kills.

That is not Benjamin's side, but it is Žižek's. And in his recent writings, as the actual—or, in his Heideggerian terminology, the "ontic"—possibility of revolution recedes, its "ontological" importance has increased. No, the Revolution will not bring the millennium. As a historical science, Marxism is false. Divine violence "strikes from out of nowhere, a means without an end." And yet "one should nevertheless insist that there is no 'bad courage.'" The courage displayed in the Revolution is its own justification, it is the image of the utopia it cannot achieve. "*The urge of the moment is the true utopia*."

Žižek is hardly the only leftist thinker who has believed in the renovating power of violence, but it is hard to think of another one for whom the revolution itself was the *acte gratuite*. For the revolutionary, Žižek instructs in *In Defense of Violence*, violence involves "the heroic assumption of the solitude of a sovereign decision." He becomes the "master" (Žižek's Hegelian term) because "he is not afraid to die, [he] is ready to risk everything." True, "democratic materialism furiously rejects" the "infinite universal Truth" that such a figure brings, but that is because "democracy as a rule cannot reach beyond pragmatic utilitarian inertia … a leader is necessary to trigger the enthusiasm for a Cause." In sum, "without the Hero, there is no Event"—a formula from a video game that Žižek quotes with approval. He grants that "there is definitely something terrifying about this attitude—however, this terror is nothing less than the condition of freedom."

There is a name for the politics that glorifies risk, decision, and will; that yearns for the hero, the master, and the leader; that prefers death and the infinite to democracy and the pragmatic; that finds the only true freedom in the terror of violence. Its name is not communism. Its name is fascism, and in his most recent work Žižek has inarguably revealed himself as some sort of fascist. He admits as much in *Violence*, where he quotes the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk on the "re-emerging Left-Fascist whispering at the borders of academia"—"where, I guess, I belong." There is no need to guess.

Žižek endorses one after another of the practices and the values of fascism, but he obstinately denies the label. Is "mass choreography displaying disciplined movements of thousands of bodies," of the kind Leni Riefenstahl loved to photograph, fascist? No, Žižek insists, "it was Nazism that stole" such displays "from the workers' movement, their original creator." (He is willfully blind to the old and obvious conclusion that totalitarian form accepts content from the left and the right.) Is there something fascist about what Adorno long ago called the jargon of authenticity—"the notions

Café

In that café in a foreign town bearing a French writer's
name I read *Under the Volcano*
but with diminishing interest. You should heal yourself,
I thought. I'd become a philistine.
Mexico was distant, and its vast stars
no longer shone for me. The day of the dead continued.
A feast of metaphors and light. Death played the lead.
Alongside a few patrons at the tables, assorted fates:
Prudence, Sorrow, Common Sense. The consul, Yvonne.
Rain fell. I felt a little happiness. Someone entered,
someone left, someone finally discovered the *perpetuum mobile*.
I was in a free country. A lonely country.
Nothing happened, the heavy artillery lay still.
The music was indiscriminate: pop seeped
from the speakers, lazily repeating: many things will happen.
No one knew what to do, where to go, why.
I thought of you, our closeness, the scent
of your hair in early autumn.
A plane ascended from the runway
like an earnest student who believes
the ancient masters' sayings.
Soviet cosmonauts insisted that they did not find
God in space, but did they look?

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI

Translated from the Polish by Clare Cavanagh

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of decision, repetition, assuming one's destiny . . . mass discipline, sacrifice of the individual for the collective, and so forth"? No, again: "there is nothing 'inherently fascist' " in all that. Is the cult of martyrdom that surrounds Che Guevara a holdover from the death worship of reactionary Latin American Catholicism, as Paul Berman has argued? Perhaps, Žižek grants, "but—so what?" "To be clear and brutal to the end," he sums up, "there is a lesson to be learned from Hermann Goering's reply, in the early 1940s, to a fanatical Nazi who asked him why he protected a well-known Jew from deportation: 'In this city, I decide who is a Jew!' . . . In this city, it is we who decide what is left, so we should simply ignore liberal accusations of inconsistency."

IV.

That sentence is a remarkable moment in Žižek's writing. It stands out even among the many instances in which Žižek, before delivering himself of some monstrous sentiment, warns the reader of the need to be harsh, never to flinch before liberal pieties. In order to defend himself against the charge of proto-fascism, Žižek falls back on Goering's joke about Jews! This is not just the "adrenalin-fueled" audacity of the bold writer who "dares the reader to disagree." To produce this quotation in this context is a sign, I think, of something darker. It is a dare to himself to see how far he can go in the direction of indecency, of an obsession that has nothing progressive or revolutionary about it.

It is not surprising that it is the subject of the Jews that calls forth this impulse in Žižek, because the treatment of Jews and Judaism in his work has long been unsettling—and in a different way from his treatment of, say, the United States, which he simply denounces. Žižek's books are loosely structured and full of digressions, more like monologues than treatises, but for that very reason, his perpetual return to the subject of the Jews functions in his writing the way a similar fixation might function in an analysand's recital: as a hint of something hidden that requires critical examination.

Typically, the form that Žižek's remarks on Jews take is that of an exposition of the mentality of the anti-Semite. This is an unimpeachable and rather common forensic device, but somehow it does not quite account for the passionate detail of Žižek's explorations. Consider, for instance, the passage in *The Metastases of Enjoyment* in which Žižek, in order to explicate John McCumber's theory about "the logic of the signifier" in Hegel, writes: "In order to explain this 'reflexivity,' let us resort to the logic of anti-Semitism. First, the series of markers that designate real properties are abbreviated-immediated in the marker 'Jew': (avaricious, profiteering, plotting, dirty. . .)—Jew. We then reverse the order and 'explicate' the marker 'Jew' with the series (avaricious, profiteering, plotting, dirty. . .)—that is, this series now provides the answer to the question 'What does "Jew" mean?' " In the ensuing discussion, Žižek goes on to recite this list of "Jewish" adjectives six more times.

It is an odd way to demonstrate a point of linguistic theory. Odd, too, is the passage in *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* where Žižek discusses the ideological function of Nazi anti-Semitism: "one could say that even if most of the Nazi claims about the Jews had been true (that they exploited the Germans, that they seduced German girls, and so forth. . .) their anti-Semitism would still have been (and was) pathological, since it repressed the true reason why the Nazis *needed* anti-Semitism in order to sustain their ideological position." Why this need to keep open, as if for the sake of argument, the possibility that the Jews really were guilty of all the things of which the Nazis accused them? Why, when Žižek returns to this same line of reasoning in *Violence*—"even if rich Jews in the Germany of the 1930s 'really' exploited German workers, seduced their daughters," and so on—are there quotation marks around "really," as though the truth or the falsehood of Jewish villainy were a question to be postponed until it can be given fuller consideration?

These moments, unpleasant as they are, are not quite expressions of anti-Semitism. But in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek does make plain what he might call the "fantasmatic screen" through which he sees Jews. This occurs in his discussion of *Man Is Wolf to Man*, the Gulag memoir of a Polish Jew named Janusz Bardach. In his book, Žižek writes, Bardach relates that when he was freed from the Kolyma camp but still forced to remain in the region, he took a job in a hospital, where he worked with a doctor on "a desperate method of providing the sick and starving prisoners with some vitamins and nutritious foodstuffs. The camp hospital had too large a stock of human blood for transfusions which it was planning to discard; Bardach reprocessed it, enriched it with vitamins from local herbs, and sold it back to the hospital." Later, when the hospital objected to this technique, Bardach found a way to do the same thing with deer blood, "and soon developed a successful business." Here is Žižek's reaction to this story:

"Finally, Zionist thinker Marie Syrkin gets the recognition she deserves . . . It is not sentimental overpraise to say that Marie Syrkin deserves a place at the roundtable of great intellects who helped shape contemporary Jewish-American liberalism."

—*Haaretz*

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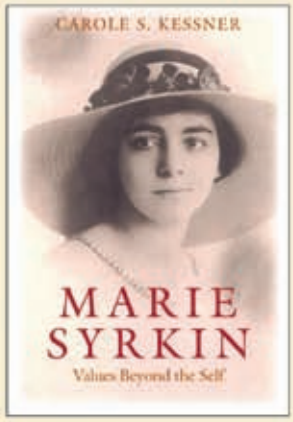

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"My immediate racist association was, of course: 'Typical Jews! Even in the worst gulag, the moment they are given a minimum of freedom and space for maneuver, they start trading—in human blood!'"

Now, Žižek is telling this story against himself, as an illustration of the way "racism works as a spontaneous disposition lurking beneath the surface" of all our minds. Still, there is something chilling about that "of course": his implication is that we all harbor the association of Jews with profiteering and blood-drinking, though we ought to try to suppress it. It is at such a moment that one realizes that for Žižek, born and raised in a city that the Holocaust left almost without Jews (today the official Jewish Community of Slovenia estimates there are four hundred to six hundred Jews in the whole country), Jews are a mere abstraction, objects of fantasy and speculation, that can be forced to play any number of roles in his psychic economy.

In his recent writings, as his concerns have shifted more and more toward the political, the roles reserved for Jews and Judaism have become decidedly more negative. True, Žižek is less straightforwardly hostile to Israel than many European leftists. In his chapter on the subject in *Violence*, he writes that "everybody knows the only viable solution" to the Middle East stalemate is the two-state solution, with a Jewish state and a Palestinian state side by side. Yet Žižek's sovereign disdain for fact, along with his imaginative fixation on the Jews, ensures that his portrait of Israel is a malign fantasy.

"In all honesty I have to admit that every time I travel to Israel, I experience that strange thrill of entering a forbidden territory of illegitimate violence," he declares. "Does this mean I am (not so) secretly an anti-Semite?" (Note the disarming sincerity that expects absolution, and in Žižek's case usually receives it.) One manifestation of this illegitimate violence, he writes, is that "the Jews, the exemplary victims … are now considering a radical 'ethnic cleansing' (the 'transfer'—a perfect Orwellian misnomer—of the Palestinians from the West Bank)." In fact, "the Jews" are not considering this at all; the only political party in Israel that did advocate such an obscenity, Meir Kahane's Kach, was banned from the Knesset for exactly that reason. But such merely empirical considerations cannot be allowed to stand in the way of Žižek's "dialectical" conclusion. As far back as World War II, he remarks, rehearsing one of the oldest and most pointless "ironies" of modern history, "the Nazis and the radical Zionists shared a common interest.… In both cases, the purpose was a kind of 'ethnic cleansing.'"

This method of alleviating European guilt by casting "the exemplary victims" of the Holocaust as in some sense the agents of holocaust is far from unknown on the European left. But what is less common, even there, is Žižek's resurrection of some of the oldest tropes of theological and philosophical anti-Semitism. The key text here is Žižek's book *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, which appeared in 2000. It addresses "the delicate question of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity."

In Žižek's telling, that relationship is sickeningly familiar. Invoking Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Žižek asserts that Judaism harbors a "'stubborn attachment' … to the unacknowledged violent founding gesture that haunts the public legal order as its spectral supplement." Thanks to this Jewish stubbornness, he continues, "the Jews did not *give up the ghost*; they survived all their ordeals precisely because they refused to *give up the ghost*." This vision of Judaism as an undead religion, surviving zombie-like long past the date of its "natural" death, is taken over from Hegel, who writes in the *Phenomenology of Mind* about the "fatal unholy void" of this "most reprobate and abandoned" religion. This philosophical anti-Judaism, which appears in many modern thinkers, including Kant, is a descendant of the Christian anti-Judaism that created the figure of the Wandering Jew, who also "refused to *give up the ghost*."

It makes sense, then, that Žižek should finally cast his anti-Judaism in explicitly theological terms. Why is it that so many of the chief foes of totalitarianism in the second half of the twentieth century were Jews—Arendt, Berlin, Levinas? One might think it is because the Jews were the greatest victims of Nazi totalitarianism, and so had the greatest stake in ensuring that its evil was recognized. But Žižek has another explanation: the Jews are stubbornly rejecting the universal love that expresses itself in revolutionary terror, just as they rejected the love of Christ. "No wonder," he writes in the introduction to *In Defense of Lost Causes*, "that those who demand fidelity to the name 'Jews' are also those who warn us against the 'totalitarian' dangers of any radical emancipatory movement. Their politics consists in accepting the fundamental finitude and limitation of our situation, and the Jewish Law is the ultimate mark of this finitude, which is why, for them, all attempts to overcome Law and tend towards all-embracing Love (from Christianity through the French Jacobins to Stalinism) must end up in totalitarian terror."

Stalinism, in this reading, is the heir to Christianity, and yet another attempt to overcome law with love. Here Žižek is explicating the views of Badiou, to whom the book is dedicated, but it is safe to say that Žižek endorses those views, since precisely the same logic is at work in *The Fragile Absolute*, where he writes of "the Jewish refusal to assert love for the neighbor outside the confines of the Law," as against the Christian "endeavor to break the very vicious cycle of Law/sin." "No wonder," Žižek says, "that, for those fully identified with the Jewish 'national substance' … the appearance of Christ was a ridiculous and/or traumatic scandal."

It does not bother Žižek that this hoary dichotomy is built on a foundation of complete ignorance of both Judaism and Christianity. Nothing could be lazier than to recycle the ancient Christian myth of Judaism as a religion of "mere law." And nothing could be more insulting to Christianity than to reduce it romantically to antinomianism, which has always been a Christian heresy. "Christianity," Žižek remarks, "is … a form of anti-wisdom *par excellence*, a crazy wager on Truth." But surely it is no part of the Pascalian wager that murdering millions of people will help to win it.

And there is no doubt that this scale of killing is what Žižek looks forward to in the Revolution. "What makes Nazism repulsive," he writes, "is not the rhetoric of a final solution as such, but the concrete twist it gives to it." Perhaps there is supposed to be some reassurance for Jews in that sentence; but perhaps not. For in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, again paraphrasing Badiou, Žižek writes: "To put it succinctly, the only true solution to the 'Jewish question' is the 'final solution' (their annihilation), because Jews … are the ultimate obstacle to the 'final solution' of History itself, to the overcoming of divisions in all-encompassing unity and flexibility." I hasten to add that Žižek dissents from Badiou's vision to this extent: he believes that Jews "resisting identification with the State of Israel," "the Jews of the Jews themselves," the "worthy successors to Spinoza," deserve to be exempted on account of their "fidelity to the Messianic impulse."

In this way, Žižek's allegedly progressive thought leads directly into a pit of moral and intellectual squalor. In his

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New York Times piece against torture, Žižek worried that the normalization of torture as an instrument of state was the first step in "a process of moral corruption: those in power are literally trying to break a part of our ethical backbone." This is a good description of Žižek's own work. Under the cover of comedy and hyperbole, in between allusions to movies and video games, he is engaged in the rehabilitation of many of the most evil ideas of the last century. He is trying to undo the achievement of all the postwar thinkers who taught us to regard totalitarianism, revolutionary terror, utopian violence, and anti-Semitism as inadmissible in serious political discourse. Is Žižek's audience too busy laughing at him to hear him? I hope so, because the idea that they can hear him without recoiling from him is too dismal, and frightening, to contemplate. ◆

Christopher Benfey
THE AMERICAN LONELINESS

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF THORNTON WILDER
Edited by Robin G. Wilder and Jackson R. Bryer
(HarperCollins, 768 pp., $49.95)

It is fortunate for literary historians that Thornton Wilder and Edmund Wilson did not meet at the Princeton-Yale football game or, heaven forbid, in Edna St. Vincent Millay's bedroom. They were brought together instead at one of Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald's weekend debauches at their rented estate of Ellerslie, outside Wilmington, Delaware, in the winter of 1928. Wilson had heard that the Fitzgeralds' latest parties were "on a more elaborate scale than their old weekends at Westport or Great Neck," an impression confirmed by the invitation. "All is prepared for February 25th," Fitzgerald wrote Wilson. "The stomach pumps are polished and set out in rows, stale old enthusiasms are being burnished.... Pray gravity to move your bowels. It's little we get done for us in this world. Answer. Scott."

Ellerslie proved to be an imposing white mansion built during the 1840s, with majestic Greek columns and high-ceilinged rooms. "I had never seen Scott and Zelda in such a magnificent setting," Wilson wrote in his vivid account of the occasion in *The Shores of Light*. The main attraction for Wilson turned out not to be the house, the booze, or the women—who included Gerald Murphy's younger sister Esther—but a fellow writer. "I arrived there with Thornton Wilder," Wilson wrote, "whom I had not known before and whose books I had not read."

The encounter occurred at a decisive moment for the careers of both writers, and for the exceedingly self-conscious literary generation to which they belonged. "Nothing interests me more," Wilder wrote Fitzgerald, "than thinking of our generation as a league and as a protest to the whole cardboard generation that precedes us." Two years older than Wilder, Wilson had begun his brilliant stint at *The New Republic* but had not yet published a major book of criticism. Wilder's first novel, *The Cabala*, had appeared in 1926, the same year as *The Sun Also Rises*; and his second novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, exploded on the scene the following year. Such precociousness presented a special case for Wilson. Wilder was evidently a modern, someone to place among the "lost" generation (as Gertrude Stein had named them) of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and himself—and yet he was just as clearly an outsider, or at least an outrigger, of some as-yet-to-be-identified variety.

Fitzgerald, eager to draw the shy, Yale-educated prep-school French teacher into his dashing retinue, arranged to have Wilder and Wilson picked up at the train station, but it was Marcel Proust who helped to smooth the way between them. "I had just read the final installment of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, which had reached New York not long before, and was about to describe it to Wilder," Wilson recalled.

> There are few things I enjoy so much as talking to people about books which I have read but they haven't, and making them wish they had—preferably a book that is hard to get or in a language that they do not know. But in this case my expectation was disappointed, for it turned out that Wilder had been following Proust just as attentively as I had and had read *Le Temps Retrouvé* as promptly.

This unexpected and slightly deflating news prompted an immediate revaluation of Wilder on Wilson's part. He was, he confessed, surprised to find Wilder "a person of such positive and even peppery opinions."

> He had his doubts about *Le Temps Retrouvé*; he declared that too many of the characters turned out to be homosexual. Charlus was all right, he said; but in the case of Saint-Loup, for example, some further explanation was needed: there was a psychological problem there that Proust had simply shirked. I called his attention to the fact that the novel ended with the phrase "dans le temps," as it had begun with the key sentence, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure," and he said he had noticed this.

The exchange in the motorcar turns out to have been a bit of a Princeton-Yale game after all, as the two precocious schoolboys showed off their French and their profound love of literature while fending off any suspicion that they might be, you know, that way.

The weekend frolic declined to its inevitable dyspeptic close. "The aftermath of a Fitzgerald evening was notoriously a painful experience," Wilson remarked. Wilder left the scene early, apparently having suffered the kind of awkward misunderstanding he often experienced with women. "You, Scott, seemed to have the impression that I was restless under Miss Murphy," he wrote.

Restlessness of various kinds—geographical, psychological, aesthetic—marked Thornton Wilder's long career, as this generous selection of his letters makes abundantly clear. Like his friend Robert Frost, Wilder was a New Englander by adoption; but in Wilder's case the adoption never really "took." Born in Wisconsin in 1897, he spent much of his life in university towns—Madison, Berkeley, Oberlin—before finding at Yale, when he was twenty, a place to come back to, if not exactly a home. As a teenager Wilder had attended school in Shanghai for a couple of years, when his father, a newspaper editor and popular public speaker, served as American consul in Hong Kong and China before settling in New Haven to run the Yale-in-China program. And as soon as he graduated from Yale,

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Wilder was off again, for a residency at the American Academy in Rome.

In April 1921, Wilder announced to his bookish mother that he had found "an Italian playwright whose plays I adore." He attended the first performance of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and relished Pirandello's "strange contorted domestic situations illustrating some metaphysical proposition." Wilder had begun writing a wistful, yearning novel of his own based on a metaphysical proposition: that the aristocratic Romans whom a visiting young American meets—including a cardinal who reads Freud and Proust and a dying poet who resembles Keats—are actually the old pagan gods in decline, and constitute a "cabal" with vague political and religious aims. Initially called "Roman Portraits" and dedicated to "my friends at the American Academy in Rome, 1920–1921," it was published five years later as *The Cabala*.

Wilder's letters from these years bear a burden of alienation that feels heavier than that of the typical college grad abroad. Newly arrived in Rome, he offers his family a self-portrait of "a young man of about twenty-one" with "large shell glasses" and a look of "strong naïveté, mercifully mitigated by a sort of frightened humor." In a letter to his father, he compares himself to his sturdier older brother Amos (a theologian and poet who taught for many years at Harvard) and their sister Charlotte, another writer: "Your queer 'aesthetic' over-cerebral son may yet turn out to be your most fundamental New Englander and most appreciative of the sentiment of the group; when Amos and Charlotte have set up independent self-centered institutions, I shall turn out to be a sort of male Cordelia!" Encounters with women in Rome seem to have been particularly strained for a male Cordelia. "I had myself a strange little sentimental experience," he confessed to his mother, "that made concrete the warnings that Continental women[,] however impersonal, comradely and full of good sense they seem, cannot understand friendship that is without romantic concomitants, cannot, cannot. Queer!"

All of this estrangement made its way into Wilder's oddly schematic fiction. Wilder loved artifice, the dilapidated machinery of the omniscient narrator and the epistolary novel (which he exploited in both *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* and *The Ides of March*). He sometimes seems to have anticipated the exposed-beam construction of the French *nouveau roman* of Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet, with its insistent reminders that we are not to mistake the novel at hand for "real life." He sought to inherit the legacy of the most exacting of the modernist masters—Proust, Joyce, and his close friend Gertrude Stein—while preserving a comforting decorum reminiscent of the eighteenth century.

Among Wilder's variegated output, the enduring popularity of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* remains a puzzle. It is a bookish novel loaded with erudition, and there is something breathtakingly absurd about its premise, as stated in the opening sentence: "On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in

Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder

all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below." Having contrived this "accident," the writer spends the next hundred pages—via the distancing perspective of a monk who happened to witness the event—wondering how such a catastrophic coincidence could possibly have occurred, and whether, as Brother Juniper wonders, "there were any plan in the universe at all." The book poses a question we often feel in the face of disaster: why did these particular people at this particular time suffer this particular fate? (Tony Blair quoted from the book in the aftermath of September 11.) "Literature," as Wilder once told a reporter from *Time*, "is the orchestration of platitudes."

Brother Juniper's neo-Calvinist meditations give a rigid (and, to the alert reader, unreliable) frame to the book. Its seductiveness lies elsewhere, in its richly delineated characters, all of whom are unhappy in love. These include the Marquesa de Montemayor, who courts her distant daughter in faraway Spain with gossipy letters; the twins Esteban and Manuel, who try to prevent the great actress Camila Perichole from coming between their love for each other; and the polymath Uncle Pio, who, from his deep love of Spanish classical drama, cultivates La Perichole's talent. Uncle Pio's definition of love gives an alternative interpretive frame to the novel: "He regarded love as a sort of cruel malady through which the elect are required to pass in their late youth and from which they emerge, pale and wrung, but ready for the business of living."

When his subsequent novels failed to match the extraordinary success of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*—which won the Pulitzer Prize and allowed Wilder to quit his teaching job and buy a house outside New Haven—Wilder discovered that his penchant for exposing artifice was more welcome in the artificial world of the theater than in the realist novel. Other writers have excelled in prose and verse (Melville and Stephen Crane, Hardy and Lawrence), but Wilder may be the only American writer (Henry James failed notably in this regard) to have written both remarkable novels and equally remarkable plays. The know-all narrator of Wilder's fiction became the confiding Stage Manager of *Our Town*, his bare-bones masterpiece of 1938.

The bleak wisdom of Wilder's play, with its three-act evocation of youth, marriage, and death in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, is lost on high school audiences eager to dismiss the play as sentimental. In a watershed revival in 1989, Spalding Gray was neither folksy nor corny as the Stage Manager, and gave a memorably mordant inflection to lines about the Civil War dead in the graveyard, who "had a notion that the Union ought to be kept together, though they'd never seen more than fifty miles of it themselves. All they knew was the name, friends—the United States of America." When Emily Webb, dead in childbirth, asks to return to the happy scene of the living, her epiphany regarding human ignorance of time passing is almost unbearable. "I can't go on," she says, like one of Beckett's heroes. "It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another." Before

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returning to the cemetery, where Wilder has ordinary chairs marking the graves, she bids goodbye to "food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths … and sleeping and waking up." She asks the Stage Manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?"

In writing plays such as the dazzling *The Skin of Our Teeth* of 1942, where the Ice Age and Noah's Flood intrude on ordinary life in New Jersey, Wilder found that he no longer needed to explain (as he had with the laborious gods-as-mortals machinery of *The Cabala*) how a single character could have multiple identities. Wilder dispensed with explanations in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, where George and Maggie Antrobus of Excelsior, New Jersey, are also Adam and Eve. The madcap maid Sabina (played by Tallulah Bankhead in the original production) periodically breaks character to complain about the multi-layered play and its author, who "hasn't made up his silly mind as to whether we're all living back in caves or in New Jersey today." Wilder's "palimpsistic" method, as Harry Levin called it, prompted Joseph Campbell to accuse Wilder of plagiarizing from *Finnegans Wake*, a mindless charge that shadowed Wilder's career during the 1940s.

Wilder's letters from this period reveal a staggering range of acquaintance. In 1942, at the age of forty-five, he managed to get himself accepted into the Army Air Intelligence, but made a quick detour to Hollywood to write the screenplay for Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (included in the Library of America's recent edition of Wilder's plays). He seems to have avoided the emotional and financial turmoil that engulfed Fitzgerald and Faulkner in the film industry. He patiently explained to Cary Grant why he could not undertake a screenplay of *Gulliver's Travels*, but added that if Howard Hawks ever directed such a thing, he should "treat it as dead-pan sober-serious travel-experience." He patiently explained to Lillian Gish why his fourth novel, *The Woman of Andros*, would make a lousy movie: no plot, silly Greco-Roman costumes.

Wilder's impressive service during World War II, when he served with distinction in North Africa and Italy, opened up a new circle of social and literary attachments. He befriended Sartre and adapted one of his plays into English. When he met Camus in 1946, he was relieved to find that he "didn't like him as much as Sartre or I'd have committed my time away in translations, services, etc." He dedicated his fifth and perhaps best novel, *The Ides of March*, to Lauro de Bosis, an Italian poet who died in the resistance to Mussolini. He called the book, in a letter to Glenway Wescott, his "post-war adjustment exercise," and found in its collage construction—imaginary letters and documents from, among others, Cicero, Catullus, Cleopatra, and Caesar—an arresting setting for existentialist ideas. "How terrifying and glorious the role of man," Caesar observes, "if, indeed, without guidance and without consolation he must create from his own vitals the meaning for his existence and write the rules whereby he lives."

Wilder was a charmer, as Edmund Wilson discovered at Ellerslie. His letters are chatty, intimate, appealingly self-deprecating. And yet there is something deeply private and withheld in both the letters and the novels; they confide without confessing. Wilson thought that he discovered a clue to the subterranean theme, or undertone, in Wilder's work, and that it had something to do with Proust. Less than a month after the weekend at Ellerslie, Wilson's "A Short View of Proust" appeared in the March 21, 1928 issue of *TNR*. His pioneering assessment of Wilder appeared in these pages later that summer, in the issue of August 8.

Certain aspects of the conversation with Wilder insinuated their way into Wilson's impressive essay on Proust, which, revised and expanded, became in 1931 the fifth chapter of *Axel's Castle*, his landmark study of modernist writing. Wilson took up the "psychological problem" that Proust, in Wilder's view, "had simply shirked." Wilder had declared that "too many of the characters" in Proust "turned out to be homosexual," a point that Wilson gave a baroque elaboration: "When Albertine finally leaves [the narrator], the emotional life of the book becomes progressively asphyxiated by the infernal fumes which Charlus has brought with him—until such a large percentage of the characters have tragically, gruesomely, irrevocably, turned out to be homosexual that we begin for the first time to find the story a little incredible." What Wilson has to say about Proust's "problem" culminates, quite predictably, in his claim that "Proust is a perfect case for psychoanalysis."

But Wilson is not interested in what makes Proust such a neurotic wreck—his dependence on his mother to the detriment of all other personal ties, his morbidity, his sexual naïveté, his inner conflict between sentimentality and sadism, and so on. Wilson is interested instead in how such a wreck of a person could produce a towering work of art, which Wilson confidently ranked, long before there was any consensus about Proust's significance, with Tolstoy, Ibsen, Nietzsche, and Wagner. What is most striking in Proust's novel, Wilson concludes, is the rigorously unromantic treatment of love, and the conviction that "reciprocal love was not merely difficult and rare, but universally impossible." An aspect of the structure of the novel seems to Wilson a key in this regard—namely, the close linkage between the death of the narrator's grandmother and the abrupt emergence of the Baron Charlus as a central presence in the book: "About the middle of 'A la Recherche du Temps Perdu,' in a series of touching, wonderfully written, but exceedingly cruel scenes, the hero's grandmother is made to die; and immediately afterwards, the figure of Charlus begins to swell to enormous proportions." For Wilson, the grandmother is merely a disguise for the mother; in psychoanalytic terms, Proust's incomplete separation from his mother helps explain the emergence (the "swelling") of homosexuality.

If Wilson's conversations with Wilder helped him to organize his ideas about Proust, it is clear that writing about Proust helped Wilson to discover something new about Wilder's early novels. "One of the things about Mr. Wilder that I do not think has yet been said," Wilson wrote, "is that he seems to be the first American novelist who has been influenced deeply by Proust." Wilder, it should be said, made no effort to conceal this debt. When he submitted drafts of *The Cabala* to *The Dial*, in 1922, he described the work as "a purely fanciful effort in the manner of Marcel Proust." The Proust imprint is palpable in the finished novel. Of a central character, the Princess Alix d'Espoli, Wilder writes: "Her thought proceeded complicatedly, but not without order, in long looping parentheses, a fine network of relative clauses, invariably terminating in some graceful turn by way of climax, some

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sudden generalization or summary surprise." When Samuele, the narrator, asks her why she speaks in perfect paragraphs, we expect Alix to answer that she has been reading Proust. She says instead that the nuns taught her to write like Madame de Sévigné.

But Wilson thought Wilder's debt to Proust went beyond style. Wilder, he proclaimed, "has listened to Proust's very heart, and his own has been timed to its beat." He meant that Wilder, like Proust, was "infatuated" with the concept of unrequited love. Just as Wilder was skeptical of the sheer number of homosexuals in Proust, Wilson grew increasingly skeptical of the sheer number of disappointed lovers in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*: "Isn't there . . . something rather forced about the pining of Captain Alvarados for his daughter?" he wondered of a fringe character. "Isn't it one case of hopeless love too many?"

Surprisingly, Wilson does not explore possible homosexual themes in Wilder's novels. The interaction of love and cruelty that Wilson had explored so tellingly in his essay on Proust gets merely a brief and dismissive mention in the discussion of Wilder: "I cannot quite believe, for example, in the harrowing scene in which Esteban is dressing Manuel's wound while Manuel abuses him so harshly." Wilson ends up finding *The Cabala* "in some ways, more interesting" than the later novel, primarily because of the contrast between the American narrator and the European sensibilities that he encounters abroad. He concludes by challenging Wilder to write directly about the United States instead—a challenge repeated a few years later, and given a Marxist twist, by Michael Gold and others—"to come away from his first-century Greek islands and his imaginary eighteenth-century Perus and turn his attention to the United States."

But I would suggest a different way to interpret Wilder's eighteenth-century Peru, and one in which the meaning of America remains central. The Marquesa de Montemayor, whose letters to her cold-hearted daughter comprise such an important feature of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, "is evidently," Wilson notes, "a transposition from Madame de Sévigné, who plays herself such an important role in Proust." Wilder was quite explicit about this "transposition," both in his letters and in his lecture "On Reading the Great Letter Writers," delivered at Yale on May 4, 1928, three months after the weekend in Ellerslie. In his Yale lecture, Wilder argues that "the way to enter the fair country that is her mind is to begin by not looking for the anecdotes of the court, or the flowerets of language . . . but to enter it as Marcel Proust said his grandmother did, by the door of her heart."

It is at this point that Wilder performs a sleight-of-hand of some importance. What he finds inside the door of Madam de Sévigné's heart is the old theme of unrequited love, tuned to a religious pitch. But this is not what Proust found inside the same door. What Proust saw in Madame de Sévigné was not a special quality of loving but a special quality of seeing. Proust's narrator reads the letters at the same time that he comes under the influence of Elstir, the painter he meets while vacationing on the Normandy coast. "I realized at Balbec that it was in the same way as he that she presented things to her readers, in the order of our perception of them, instead of first explaining them in relation to their several causes." What he learns from Madame de Sévigné, in sum, is to see things as they really are, and not as habit or preconception presents them.

What does all this have to do with America and Americans? I would suggest that it might help explain why *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* is set in Peru. In a letter from December 1927, Wilder admitted that he had never been to Peru—and added, seemingly irrelevantly, "Oh, isn't there a lot of New England in me." We find a major clue for the Peruvian setting in Wilder's Norton Lectures, delivered at Harvard in 1950 under the title "The American Characteristics of Classical American Literature." In re-reading Melville and Hawthorne, Thoreau and Dickinson, Wilder identified both a quality of loving and a quality of seeing. The lectures also provide evidence that the Marxists were wrong about Wilder—that he had been writing about America all along.

Wilder argued that there was something in the nature of the American experiment that fomented unrequited love, and that this cultural situation, with all its disappointments, created compensating conditions for fresh seeing. In studies of Thoreau and Dickinson, he explored what he called "the American Loneliness." He noted that Thoreau's disappointed love was directed at a woman he insisted on calling his sister. He noticed that Dickinson managed to "enjoy stoically nourishing an unrequited passion" for older men based on her unresolved relationship with her father. (There is more than a hint that another doomed Emily, in *Our Town*, has a similarly unresolved relationship with her father.) "In America," Wilder concluded in his Norton Lectures, "the family is the nexus of an unusually powerful ambivalence." One might add that Wilder's own family ties were unusually close: a lifelong bachelor with no documented romantic attachments beyond a fleeting homosexual affair with a friend of Gertrude Stein, recorded in 1983 in Gilbert Harrison's biography, he lived with his mother until her death in 1946, and an unmarried sister.

For Wilder, America was the land of unrequited love. To intensify Madame de Sévigné's separation from her daughter, Wilder moved her to the shadow of the Andes. He noted that it was "characteristic" of Emily Dickinson that "her

Sage

O sage I know I am I am a sage
I know unkindness is a selfish act
a straight fish act or fishy furtive act

fish or fowl and a slice of the knife
In the word selfish have you seen the fish
I meant to write you a poem of love

green sage grey sage and sings the silver wind
Swing me on the swing sway me with your hand
wing me on the wind these were all my songs

The geese in their V's are yipping like dogs
along the selvedge of the winter woods
There must be an edge to the self a hedge

against hell Must be an edge or a verge
Here is the self-edge that you cut against
Here I am savaged I meant to be saved

O sage I know I am I am a sage
I know unkindness is a savage act
and savageness is never savory

Is your heart assuaged Well mine is not
O sweet here I am whispering an urge
for the good life if goodness can be had

the great fields the geese the edge of the wood
What scraps can I salvage for the soup When
soup can't assuage there is no love to save

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thought turned often to the Alps and the Andes." Distance pushed American writers beyond habitual response, that blinding force of habit that Proust had analyzed so carefully. American writers discovered "American modes of seeing and feeling—characteristics born of a nation's history and geography." Wilder mentions Melville's description of the first sighting of Moby-Dick as "a hump like a snow-hill."

So did Proust anticipate the course of twentieth-century American literature? Edmund Wilson was convinced that he did, and equally convinced that Thornton Wilder's novels, in temperament and tone, inaugurated that inheritance. Wilder, for his part, thought that the American masters Dickinson and Thoreau, in their brokenhearted loneliness, anticipated Proust. Wilson's masterly essay in *Axel's Castle* concludes with the image of a host in his mansion, an echo perhaps of the gathering of American writers at Ellerslie during the winter of 1928:

> Surely the lament over the impossibility of ideal romantic love … announces by its very falling into absurdity the break-up of the whole emotional idealism and its ultimate analysis and readjustment along lines which Proust's own researches, running curiously close to Freud, have been among the first to suggest. "A la Recherche du Temps Perdu" subsumes, in this respect, "The Great Gatsby," "The Sun Also Rises," "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." … Proust is perhaps the last great historian of the loves, the society, the intelligence, the diplomacy, the literature and the art of the Heartbreak House of capitalist culture; and the little man with the sad appealing voice, the metaphysician's mind, the Saracen's beak, the ill-fitting dress-shirt and the great eyes that seem to see all about him like the many-faceted eyes of a fly, dominates the scene and plays host in the mansion where he is not long to be master. ◆

Sherwin B. Nuland
REALLY, DOCTOR?

TRUSTING DOCTORS: THE DECLINE OF MORAL AUTHORITY IN AMERICAN MEDICINE
By Jonathan B. Imber
(Princeton University Press, 275 pp., $29.95)

Even the advent of a growing scientific basis for medical practice—which we can most accurately date from the middle third of the nineteenth century—has not lessened by an iota the degree to which medical authority has traditionally depended primarily on a well-recognized code of morality. As that authority has been in a state of decline for the past several decades, countless commentators have sought to identify the most significant of the congeries of reasons for which the steady downward slope continues. Has the profession sold its soul to science?

In a thought-provoking dissertation, Jonathan Imber seeks to convince his readers that, at least in America, medical morality—and, consequently, faith in doctors—can be traced to the righteous influence on the profession of Protestant and (to a somewhat lesser extent) Catholic clergy during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. He believes that the waning of this influence and the parallel rise of medical technology are to be indicted as having created the situation most directly leading to the loss of doctors' authority. I would argue to the contrary: that it was always the physician's morality, more than his technical competence, that provided the basis for his authority during the many centuries before scientific medicine began to bring the full fruits of its discoveries to ever larger numbers of patients. Moreover, that morality originated in religious principles long preceding Christianity—to a large extent, those derived from the ancient Mosaic code.

Imber has written a scholarly book crammed to the margins of each page with the facts that in his view support his argument. It is not in his facts that I find fault, but in his interpretation of them. The fundamentals of his argument can be summarized by quoting a few selections from the opening pages of his book:

> For more than a century—from the 1860s to the 1970s—the American medical profession relied on a combination of commitment to rigorous training in medical science and a dedication to professional ethics that made it a revered and respected vocation.… In the first half of this book, I will examine a connection between the rise of trust in physicians and the role played by Protestant and Catholic clergymen and thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. These members of the religious community defined and bolstered the moral authority of modern medical professionals, whose responsibility to patients was grounded in the willingness of patients to trust their individual doctors. Protestant clergymen, in particular, helped to shape that trust by insisting that the physician was and would be a person of integrity and high moral character, while the Catholic perspective focused on specific moral dilemmas that physicians face in everyday practice.
>
> In the second half of the book, I will present an account of how doctors, who were once publicly perceived in this country as healers engaged in a sacred vocation, began to lose their moral authority as they increasingly became more valued for their technical competence than for their noble character.…
>
> Historians of nineteenth-century medicine in the United States have long taken for granted its white, Protestant character, so much so that one key to understanding the nature of the public's almost universal trust in medicine, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century and lasting until the middle of the twentieth, was the near uniformity of its practitioners not only in terms of their race, class, and gender, but also in terms of the kinds of cultural expectations that pertained to how they should act with respect to society, colleagues, and their patients.…
>
> Even as its influence waned, the Protestant establishment's insistence that the physician must be first a believing Christian, and thus a righteous person, gave added public credibility to the rising status of the physician's office, that is, his position of authority in society.

Reading the first half of *Trusting Doctors*, one might indeed be persuaded that "the rise of trust in physicians" was the result of "the role played by Protestant and Catholic clergymen and thinkers in the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries." Imber supports his thesis by quoting a number of sermons and medical addresses—commencement and other sorts—in which these men make what is to them

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the obvious connection between their religious beliefs and the ethics of the medical profession. In other pronouncements that Imber adduces, the divines and the devouts, in ringing inspirational phrases, exhort their medical audiences to follow Christian principles in all their interactions with patients.

One would hardly expect otherwise. Protestantism was to all intents—except the official—the American national religion during the period under discussion. The concept of medical authority having been created and bolstered by its practitioners' acceptance and absorption of a "faith-based" morality would have been very attractive to devout Protestants, and they can hardly be blamed for claiming that it arose from their own preachings and example, prior to which it was either non-existent or had attained only a much lower level.

But Imber, a sociologist and an ethicist, should know better. Medical morality has roots far deeper than those shared with Protestantism, and so does the recognition that it was the foundation for trust and accordingly for authority. In fact, it goes back to the origins of Western medicine in the Hippocratic period that began a bit before 400 B.C.E., and it was already the code of behavior for Jewish physicians almost a thousand years earlier.

The Jewish relationship between medicine and religion has been close since the time of Moses and continuing forward until the modern period. When Maimonides, a physician who wrote voluminous medical works, composed his authoritative code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, in the twelfth century, he placed strong emphasis on compassion, as well as charity in its broadest sense of beneficence to others. It is worth noting that approximately half of all Jewish physicians of the time were also rabbis and jurists, a condition that had probably existed since the Talmudic era, when it was commonly understood that the physician, though acting independently and with free will, was the individual messenger or deputy of God. For centuries, the principles of Maimonidean morality and ethics exerted such a powerful influence on Jewish doctors that the famous "Physician's Prayer" was attributed to the medieval sage until approximately 1914, when it was discovered that its true author was Markus Herz, a German-Jewish physician and philosopher and a friend of Kant, who composed it in 1783.

That Jewish doctors were hardly the only ones whose upstanding professional behavior predated Protestantism and was laced with religious principles is also made plain by invoking some of the codification of righteous behavior to which Imber himself refers, starting with the Hippocratic Oath. It is generally held that the greatest contribution of the school of physicians called Hippocratic was their separation of the causes and treatments of disease from any supernatural source. The introduction of this new philosophy enabled their accuracy of medical history-taking and physical examination, as well as their recognition of environmental influences on illness. For the Hippocratics, the origins of sickness were to be sought only in natural causes, and the same was true of methods of healing. And yet, when they enunciated their historic oath, they swore it to "Apollo the Physician and Asclepius and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses," signifying the sacred nature of the obligation of doctor to patient, and the trust that was meant to derive from it.

At all times and in all places, the elevation of an individual to the status of physician was understood to carry with it obligation of a sacralized nature. When Imber correctly points out that the dominant Protestant culture of nineteenth-century America saw medicine as a "vocation or calling," he overestimates the role of the church in promulgating such a view. All Western religions, including the pagans of Greece and Rome, regarded the profession of healing as a vocation or a calling. And the more organized the profession, the more likely it was to be regarded in this way. Late nineteenth-century Christianity endorsed such a view and promoted it, but was in no way its source. Its religious basis had been laid down more than two thousand years earlier. And so had the notion that trust in a doctor's righteousness led to the authority that had a role in healing. Thus, there is found in one of the books of the Hippocratic corpus of writings the following statement: "Some patients, though conscious that their condition is perilous, recover their health simply through their contentment with the goodness of the physician."

In America, officially sanctioned statements of righteous medical behavior can be traced to the founding of the American Medical Association in 1847, when the organization's code of ethics was written. The code was based largely on the language of Thomas Percival's *Medical Ethics*, published in 1803, which carried even more influence in the United States than it did in Percival's native England. In the form of practical maxims and moral aphorisms, Percival laid down rules of medical conduct and etiquette based on virtue and personal character—the sort of behavior one might expect of a good man motivated by a sense of beneficence. Though Percival's notions of morality arose from his deep religious faith, he did not burden his text with any reference to that fact, except from time to time when he promoted the Sabbath as a day of rest for physicians.

By the dawning of the twentieth century, the purely scientific aspects of medicine had become so far advanced that they contributed a great deal to the profession's authority, but they certainly did not replace the role of benevolence in society's image of the doctor. The refinement of the germ theory and the rapid development of surgery after the medical acceptance of antisepsis were the primary factors in what might be called the "scientization" of medicine, but even the laity could discern that much more was on the way, though most patients were not yet benefiting from it—nor would they until approximately the middle of the century. The trend toward research and the ever-greater influence of science was accelerated in America by the Flexner Report of 1910, called *Medical Education in the United States and Canada*, as medical schools increasingly patterned themselves on the model of Johns Hopkins University, which stressed high academic standards in addition to its rigorous scientific curriculum. Since the influence of Christianity on daily life was beginning its decline at that time, it is Imber's belief that science gradually took over and then surpassed faith-based morality as the source of medical authority. He cites the rise of technological competence as the main source of the trust in physicians that increased until about the 1960s. But it was an overemphasis on such competence and the waning influence of the church, he asserts, that has led to the profession's loss of authority.

Yet what is subsequent is not necessarily consequent, and I find Imber's inferences to be misguided. Skepticism about medicine's powers made its appearance in the 1960s not least because

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that was an era in which the same attitude flowered about all sources of authority, especially among the younger segment of the population. At the same time, a certain bureaucratization was beginning to have an increasingly wider influence on the care of patients, having first manifested itself several decades earlier by the increase in hospitals as the place where that care was being given, replacing the home and the one-on-one attention that was paid by the practitioner. In fact, if there is a single unifying element that may be indicted as the ultimate cause of "the decline of moral authority in American medicine," I believe it to be this one: a change in the quality of interaction between the individual patient and his or her physician.

For more than two thousand years, that interaction, and its setting of medical morality, was the primary basis of the trust and the authority placed in the members of the medical profession and the profession as a whole by those who depend on them for healing. Now the uniqueness and intimacy of the interaction has been allowed to fray. *That* is the moral crisis. It behooves the profession and the laity to recognize its gravity and to seek measures to restore as much of the old relationship between patient and physician as is reparable.

Some of this change is doubtless due to the ever-greater complexity of the diseases being treated, and to the explosion in knowledge requiring finer and finer separation into specialties, with the consequence that more personnel are involved at the bedside. But there are other causes that might be thought of as social, such as the shared responsibility that comes with the widening phenomena of group practice, and the evolution of more impersonal health insurance. Note must also be taken of the greater—much greater—level of patient awareness than existed at mid-century: America now buzzes with the information provided by health columns in newspapers and magazines, health articles in all sorts of publications, television commentary and advertising, and the ubiquitous presence of books on various health topics. Today's patient, who often goes straight from a doctor's diagnosis to the Internet to see for himself, has become the consumer of a product—health care—and his level of sophistication is high, as is his level of skepticism.

The profession of medicine has now and then given the public reason for skepticism beyond its relatively new awareness of the uncertainty of even the most scientifically rigorous care. I refer to such outrages as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, begun in 1932 and continued for forty years; the experimental injection of the hepatitis virus into retarded children at Willowbrook Hospital in New York state; and the implantation of cancer cells under the skin of debilitated elderly patients at the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital by researchers from the prestigious Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. The public has been incensed by such revelations, and rightly so. The examination of the circumstances in which these crimes were perpetrated contributed to the emergence of the modern field of bioethics, whose philosophical and moral judgments are meant to be completely secular, though contributions by members of the religious community have been significant and many.

It is increasingly difficult to tease out from modern bioethics the religious principles upon which codes of morality were originally founded. Nor is there any need to make the attempt. Though various religious communities have somewhat modified certain bioethical injunctions to suit specific aspects of their beliefs and dogmas, the fact is that the modern field as it has existed in recent decades is a secular one, in the same way that science is secular in its approach to the phenomena of nature. And its secularity in no way damages its authority. Though the role of religious thinkers will remain very significant in the analysis of moral-medical dilemmas, their contributions must be expressed, if they are to influence the relevant practitioners and institutions, in terms acceptable to all scholars who wrestle with the same complex ethical problems presented by contemporary medicine and science. It has been centuries since medicine needed an overtly religious justification for its moral code. Its authority as a profession has been independent of faith far longer than Jonathan Imber would have us think. ◆

Roy Foster
HOMAGE TO CALEDONIA

THE INVENTION OF SCOTLAND: MYTH AND HISTORY
By Hugh Trevor-Roper
(Yale University Press, 282 pp., $30)

Hugh Trevor-Roper seemed to be an Oxford don supplied by central casting. An erect Northumbrian with a distinctly patrician air, he commanded a grandee position impregnably within the Establishment. He became Regius Professor at Oxford, and Master of Peterhouse in Cambridge, and—as Lord Dacre of Glanton—a member of the House of Lords; he possessed a country house in Scotland, built for Walter Scott's family; he married the daughter of Field Marshal Earl Haig; his recently published letters to Bernard Berenson are effortlessly snobbish. But Trevor-Roper also maintained a highly developed sense of the ridiculous. After making his reputation with a subversive biography of the seventeenth-century Archbishop Laud, he turned to investigating the lives of mythomanes, eccentrics, and deceivers. (His study of the forger Edmund Backhouse, *Hermit of Peking*, is one of his most delightful books.) Equally unpredictable was his fascination with the banality of evil as reflected in the Nazi high command, which inspired *The Last Days of Hitler*, his groundbreaking and engrossing account of life in the Führer's bunker.

Trevor-Roper was a master of the interrogative essay, which in his youth he used as a billhook to slash and burn the reputations of erring colleagues. It was also the weapon used to powerful effect in some enduringly important historical debates, such as controversies concerning the rise of the Tudor gentry, the general crisis of the seventeenth century, and "the invention of tradition" in the age of romanticism and nationalism. That last idea was also the name of a landmark collection of essays edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger a quarter-century ago, in which a variety of historians explored the surprisingly recent origin of myths to do with—inter alia—the British monarchy, the construction of colonial Africa, and the institution of Welsh bards, asking pertinent questions about the issues at stake,

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the interests involved, and the compensatory psychological effects of such intellectual and literary maneuvers.

As a historiographical concept, "the invention of tradition" proved equally attractive to Marxists (old and new), skeptical liberals, and cynical Tories; and it rapidly entered the lexicon. Trevor-Roper's contribution to the book was an urbane dissection of "the Highland Tradition of Scotland." It proved (to his own satisfaction, at least) that the culture of the Highlands—bagpipes, kilts, clans, and all—was a Victorian fantasy attached retrospectively to an area that was "racially and culturally . . . a colony of Ireland." This unnerving notion, which was not universally welcome, forms the subject of his latest, though posthumous, book—a lively salvo from beyond the grave.

Trevor-Roper died five years ago, but his habit of accumulating unpublished essays and his taste for writing many things at once have enabled him to have a prolific afterlife. A substantial biography of a pioneering Calvinist court physician has already appeared since his death, and more essay collections are in the pipeline. This would not be possible without the affection and the commitment of his friends and ex-students, most of whom loved and revered him. One of them, Jeremy Cater, has skillfully edited Trevor-Roper's lectures on Scottish myth and history, originally delivered at Emory University, in which he further developed his understanding of the "invention of tradition." It is a beguiling, witty, and elegant volume. While leaving wide open the enduring question as to whether Trevor-Roper was a Whig or a Tory, it shows him at his skeptical Gibbonian best.

The Trevor-Roper style is not precisely Gibbon's, though he uses footnotes with a similar blend of savagery and mischief. The very first one in the book begins, joyfully: "The cannibalism of the Scots—a very sore point with later Scotch antiquaries—rests on a single statement of Jerome in his *Adversus Jovinianum*. For the discomfort which this text caused later, see, for example, the several pages of intellectual writhing over the topic by Sir Thomas Craig." His own prose does not writhe. It has a clarity and a pungency that suggests several Scots exemplars (Hume, Cockburn, Stevenson); and Scotland was one of his preoccupations. This book investigates the political, literary, and sartorial trappings of "Scottishness," building on earlier writings about Scotch historians and the surprisingly recent creation of clan tartans. It provides a consistently witty and beautifully written demonstration of the political uses of history, the unappeasable appetite of nation-builders for self-referring myths, and the harmless fun provided by the human desire to make ourselves into what we are not.

This was how the "Sobieski Stuarts," two English brothers who began life in the early nineteenth century as John and Charles Allen, ended as claimants to the throne of Scotland. They sum up the syndrome for Trevor-Roper, in his inimitably empathetic way. The brothers were

Sir Henry Raeburn, *Sir Walter Scott*, 1822

indulged and fêted by a whole gallery of Jacobite wannabes, and devoted themselves to the creation of marvelously complex genealogies and secret documents, constructing arcane connections to the royal houses of central Europe. (Like many magicians, they spent some time in Prague.) Even after exposure, they retained a corpus of true believers, appealing to Queen Victoria to relieve their poverty on account of their royal blood. "Their policy had been that of all successful mystery-men. . . . They simply played their part as if they believed it, and left others to speculate—and by their speculation to build up the myth."

But myth-making raises other questions, too, questions not pursued in this book. Trevor-Roper brilliantly evokes the sixteenth-century scholar George Buchanan, who moved from being "a migratory cosmopolitan intellectual" in the Erasmian mode to tutoring the future King James VI. Along the way Buchanan constructed the case against James's tragic mother, Mary Queen of Scots, and created a historical pedigree for independent Scottish monarchy. *The Invention of Scotland* then moves on to another piece of myth-making two centuries later: the 1760s forgery by an obscure Scots writer named James Macpherson of a great corpus of "ancient" bardic poetry, supposedly authored by "Ossian," a Scottish Homer lost in the mists of time. The book ends, more or less, with the endorsement of the sartorial myth of kilts, tartans, and the whole iconography stage-managed by Walter Scott. This was symbolized by the visit of King George IV to his northern kingdom in 1822, where he was kitted out hilariously in the full stage garb. What followed was the domestication of the Highlands into theme-park history, passionately endorsed by Queen Victoria and her successors.

At the end of it all, one wonders: why Scotland? And how did "Caledonia" get away with it, when the Victorian stereotypes attached to the other Celtic elements of the once–United Kingdom were tarred with such damaging stereotypes by the metropolitan arbiters of opinion: the Welsh mendacious, hypocritical, sexually incontinent; the Irish dirty, brutish, stupid, and disloyal. In point of fact, Scotland no less than Ireland was marked by endemic poverty, excessive drinking, traumatic emigration patterns, brutal violence, and a history of dispossession; self-pity, religious bigotry, and all sorts of social introversion were no less rife. Yet Scotland the Brave emerged as a jewel of empire, combining robust moral independence with support for the Best of British: a reservoir of bonny, brainy, humorous, talented empire-builders. ("Scotty" the engineer remains a classic component of imperial and post-imperial adventure stories, culminating in *Star Trek*.)

Religion, of course, has a lot to do with it; Scots Catholicism is conveniently airbrushed from the stereotype, and the dominie remains a much less threatening figure than the Irish priest. Nor did the Irish Union of 1800 operate in as advantageous a way as the Scottish

NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND

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Union of 1707. In the end one is forced to conclude that the Scots did it all better, and more ruthlessly. They kept vital freedoms in religion, law, and education. They used (and invented) their history to advantage. They jumped onto the Union bandwagon, infiltrating the metropolitan government (right down to Gordon Brown) as well as the empire. Poor as they were, they had an industrial revolution at the right time. But they were also welcomed in, and allowed access, in ways denied to the Irish—partly owing to ethnic and religious prejudice, partly because Irish resistance to incorporation took a different course. And the interesting question at the beginning of the twenty-first century is whether Scotland will follow Ireland into complete independence (within Europe) or stick with the experimental version of Home Rule that it currently enjoys.

The Invention of Scotland reminds us of several suggestive issues behind these developments, notably the enduring contrast between Lowland and Highland Scotland, which are profoundly different regions in terms of economics, culture, and political history. The sensitive question of Irish-Scottish connections features here. The original "Scots" were in fact Irish invaders who, after the Romans left Britain, colonized present-day Argyllshire, then known as the kingdom of Dalriada. Instead of gradually being absorbed by the native Pictish stock, the Dalriadans succeeded in "Scoticizing" them (Trevor-Roper's word). The process tends to be submerged by the way in which nationally minded historians invented pedigrees of imaginary Scottish kings—forty of them, to be on the safe side. (The fact that this was exposed as a fantasy by a jeering Welsh antiquary, Humphrey Lhuyd, may be significant.) The Ossian cult revived the troubled question of Irish influence, since the originary fables recorded in these reconstituted epic poems were in fact Irish, as was pointed out by outraged Irish antiquaries.

The whole question of Ossian has been examined by several penetrating recent studies, but none is as entertaining as Trevor-Roper's, which is written in the spirit of a detective story. The cloudy poetic romances published by James Macpherson, capturing the ear of polite England and Europe (notably the Napoleonic court) and winning endorsement from some authorities who rapidly came to regret their ingenuousness, were certainly based on some Gaelic fragments, though not the great Homeric panoply that Macpherson claimed. But even accepting the residue of authentic material, there has always been an intriguingly bad fit between the awkward and unpopular medium-figure of Macpherson, who clammed up in later life, and the rolling, romantic verbosity of his bardic productions. Trevor-Roper's theory, by brilliant sleuthing, uncovers a sort of committee of forgers clustered around Macpherson's cleverer cousin, a Highland laird who died inconveniently soon, leaving his cloddish relative with an uncomfortable inheritance. It is a marvelous story, delivered as a kind of sucker punch from beyond the grave, and it should have exactly the detonating effect its author so much liked to produce.

It also suggests that enduring Scots theme of doubleness, doppelgängers, Jekylls and Hydes: the containment of multitudes within a single apparently well-organized organism. Trevor-Roper writes sympathetically of Walter Scott: "Within him there were two—at least two—souls. At one time he would be the Augustan man of letters, the practical Unionist, the well-balanced, scholarly heir of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment who edited Dryden, saw through Ossian, and brought gas to Abbotsford; at another he would be the romantic Jacobite, the poet who would allow himself to be carried away by his own too sympathetic vision of an archaic Highland past." Trevor-Roper credits Scott's Jacobite novel *Waverly* (1814) with starting the tartan craze, and with instigating the fetish of the kilt. Even more suggestively, he asserts that the British Army's Highland regiments really began the study of stirring traditions based on rickety foundations. The Sobieski Stuart brothers also played an important part, writing *The Costume of the Clans* and unwisely publishing in 1842 an elaborately edited "ancient" text about traditional Scottish dress, the *Vestiarium Scoticum*, which was exposed as yet another invention. But one of the enduring pleasures of this book, as of the study of national tradition in general, is the discovery of how little hard fact actually matters.

How inevitably an indulged and self-created and often fantastic "national tradition" leads to full-blown nationalism is a large and open question. The Scottish National Party, whose platform is based on an independent Scotland in Europe, is currently in the ascendant and threatens to overcome the Labour Party in Scotland, the Conservatives already having

This book constitutes a surgical dissection of the Republican Party, exposing it as the Party of Big Business, the POBB. Furthermore it is the Party of White Males, lacking even a single black member in Congress. (The Democrats have 44). The POBB's Congressional ranks contain few women, only 27, while the Democrats have 64.

George Bush is quickly revealed as the Thief-in-Chief, after he purposefully purloined the 2000 election. Coupled with him is Dick Cheney. The two, plotting furiously, manufactured a cause for war with Iraq where absolutely none existed. Truth quickly became a casualty. Bush has already secured his position as the nation's worst Chief Executive.

In January of 2009 we Democrats should view with great pride our first black President, Barack Obama, addressing Congress with its group of lily-white Republicans, sullen and resentful. Accompanying our new President will be a sense of exaltation as we Democrats await deliverance from Bush's reign of ruin.

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By
Richard John Siviur

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been liquidated. SNP ideologues tend to fulminate against the Scotophilia created by Victorian Romantics, promoting instead the gritty values of post-industrial Glasgow, the patois of "Lallans" (lowland Scots dialect), and Robbie Burns above Walter Scott, the skirl of the bagpipes, or the ruined castle-keeps outlined on a million shortbread tins. But these icons of radical authenticity may owe more than they realize to preceding inventors, who helped to create the sense of difference and superiority on which the germ of nationalism thrives.

There is a final irony about this wonderful little book. Trevor-Roper is remembered most vividly in the popular mind for being himself the victim of a hoax: late in his career he unwisely authenticated the supposed discovery of Hitler's missing diary, which turned out to have been a forgery. Rushed into a snap judgment by a newspaper, the great historian lived to regret bitterly his credulity. Perhaps this is why he held back in his lifetime from publishing a book that deals so brilliantly and authoritatively with the readiness to believe in constructions that are entertaining, edifying, or—most potent of all—comforting, and cast a compensatory glamour over harsh realities and foregone conclusions.

Nathan Glazer
THE BEST ADDRESSES

WHO'S YOUR CITY?: HOW THE CREATIVE ECONOMY IS MAKING WHERE YOU LIVE THE MOST IMPORTANT DECISION OF YOUR LIFE
By Richard Florida
(Basic Books, 374 pp., $26.95)

In 2002, with *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Richard Florida launched one of those terms or categories or ideas—there have been many—that try to structure our contemporary societies into something more complicated than the Marxian conflict between the owners of the means of production and those who are exploited as proletarians working on them. His "creative class" has become more than a concept and something like a commercial enterprise, with its own website, its consultation services for cities and enterprises, its large research undertakings. According to the jacket of his new book, Florida is the creator of the Creative Class Group, located in Washington, D.C., Toronto (where Florida is now director of the Martin Prosperity Institute and professor of business and creativity in the business school of the University of Toronto), Pittsburgh (where he was for many years a professor at Carnegie-Mellon University), and Europe. He is, his publisher tells us, "one of the world's leading public intellectuals."

The "creative class" includes those who work in occupations and industries that call upon some measure of creativity. Florida divides them into a "super-creative core" consisting of computer and mathematical occupations; architecture and engineering; life, physical, and social sciences; education, training, and library occupations; arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media—a grouping that seems rather too capacious to merit the term "super-creative"—and a larger, wider group of "creative professionals," which includes management, law, health care, and some in sales and sales management. Together the two categories make up a large part of the American labor force. Florida tracked the rapid rise in the numbers of this creative class, contrasted it with the decline of workers in manufacturing, and posited its significance for innovation and economic growth. More interestingly, he argued that the growth and decline of urban areas is dependent on their ability to attract the members of the creative class—that it was more important for cities to have a "people climate" than a "business climate."

The "people climate" that attracted the creative class was not simply the natural amenities we think of to explain the growth of the Sunbelt and the decline of the industrial heartland. In Florida's view, a climate that would attract the creative class is within the powers of imaginative local communities to, well, create. "Neither sunnier weather nor warmer climates are systematically associated with regional growth," Florida wrote, adding: "University of Chicago sociologist Terry Clark finds that natural amenities, including sun and temperature, are not associated with location decisions of high human capital individuals. [They] are more likely to be drawn to cities that offer 'constructed amenities,' from arts and culture to high-quality restaurants."

Florida is devoted to statistically constructed indices, and he has created many, demonstrating how they are related to economic growth. But he is also very responsive to the concrete aspects of urban life, to his own experience in various cities, to the varying kinds of urbanism that exist, and I find all this quite attractive. He is a devotee of Jane Jacobs—not only her classic work on the dense and mixed inner city but also her later books on the economy of cities; and he appreciates the architecture and the urban texture of the older parts of our cities, and sees in them a resource that can be attractive to the creative class. He draws upon the experience of his large Italian-American family growing up in Newark, his own experience in learning and working in various parts of the United States, and in particular his long residence in Pittsburgh to introduce into his writing a concreteness and a vividness that supplements and gives life to his statistical analyses. His account of how Pittsburgh has tried to recreate itself is a classic analysis of where cities go wrong (by building stadiums and convention centers) and where they can go right (by taking advantage of their ethnic working-class areas and their industrial-age architecture).

Florida probably gives too much credit to the amenities that attract him in explaining the rise and fall of cities, and he has so been faulted by Edward Glaeser and other urban economists. They put more weight on traditional elements affecting the competitive advantages of cities, such as changes in modes and efficiencies of types of transportation, and the business-friendliness or -unfriendliness of city and state policies. Florida's most striking and newsworthy effort in the direction of bringing together his own urban experience with his statistical analysis was his invention of a "Gay Index," which to him was one of the most important marks of a vibrant and innovative economy. "In virtually all our analyses," he remarked, "the Gay Index did better than any other individual measure as a predictor of hi-tech industry." Where there were gays, and the acceptance of gays, there one found the creative class. Streetwise observations could be supplemented with statistics: it appears that detailed census reports make it possible to separate "unmarried partners" of the same sex from "roommates" and "unrelated adults," and Florida has increasingly made much of this.

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Again, perhaps too much. Florida's new book begins with the story of his agitated preparation for an appearance on *The Colbert Report*, and indeed the first thing that Colbert raises, as one might expect, is the Gay Index. "A disturbing new study," Colbert begins, "has found a solution to the housing slump: live next to gay people. The study's author measured changes in income and property values using something called the Bohemian-Gay index.... The theory is that tolerant communities, where homosexuals are likely to reside, nurture an open-minded culture of creativity which can lead to innovations like Google, or YouTube, or ShirtlessHunksBaggingGroceries.com."

The sarcasm is not altogether unfair. *Who's Your City?* is something like a self-help book on where to live. Florida introduces it as a discussion of urban life from the point of view of increasing one's opportunities and happiness. But despite the apparent straightforwardness of its purpose, the book does not quite hang together. One would expect, for example, that Florida would base his advice on where to live on the huge survey that he conducted on the relationship of place to happiness, which questioned 27,000 people in 8,000 communities. But the results are reported sketchily and not very clearly. "Personal life" and "work" were most important in happiness, but "place"—and the point of the survey was to plumb for the significance of "place"—was up there in third place as a contributor to happiness. Satisfaction with one's community, according to the survey, rises with income; renters seem more satisfied with their communities than homeowners; the more education the respondents have, the more satisfied they are; married people are more satisfied with their community than those separated or divorced, older people are more satisfied than younger, Hispanics are the most satisfied, and African Americans are the least. In some cities—Denver and Austin are mentioned—people seemed satisfied with all aspects of their lives. Other cities—such as Washington, D.C.—showed a greater discordance. Many other findings are reported, including details in an appendix that is not easy to interpret.

But how does all this relate to where one should live? A good part of the book is devoted to lists of the best places to live depending on one's stage in life: whether one is a single starting out, a young professional, married with children, or an empty nester. There are recommended lists of cities for each stage of life, with one list for "all households" and a separate one for gay and lesbian households, as if that were the most significant subcategory of the population to keep in mind. If one were considering which significant segment of the population might have different tastes and opportunities in selecting communities to live in, surely minority households would be more important. Curiously, even for the category "married with children," the same subdivision holds—"all households" and then "gay and lesbian." The lists are further subdivided between "Overall" and "Best Buy."

It is not at all clear how all these lists of "Best Places" were determined. Florida rates every American metropolitan area with a population of more than 250,000 in terms of its suitability for households of different life stages and sexual orientation—but the statistical sources and system of determination are not given. Is the survey on place and happiness one source? We are not told. The main source given for these lists is the "2005 American Communities Survey of the US Bureau of the Census," but how is this used to determine what places may be the "best buy" for people generally or for gays and lesbians of various life stages?

And there is a more serious problem with these listings. While the "places" listed are recognizable cities, they are actually Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas, which often are huge and are hardly helpful when proffered as advice as to "where to live." Thus, if "New York" appears on a list, the appendix informs us that this is the metropolitan statistical area that includes New York City, northern New Jersey, Long Island, and other parts of New York and Pennsylvania. "Philadelphia" includes Camden, Wilmington, and other parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland. The size and the diffuseness of these entities somewhat vitiates the utility of Florida's recommendations. Fortunately, he also gives his ratings for small urban concentrations down to 250,000 people, and those are more meaningful if the reader is actually hunting for a place to live.

Florida is interested in the growth and the development of "mega-regions" around the world, and how they stack up against each other on economic output and innovation and creativity. His *Flight of the Creative Class* notes that these days creative people can also choose to go abroad for greater opportunity and more desirable places to live, and increasingly they do. Florida and his collaborators have put a good deal of effort in his new book in defining such mega-regions throughout the world and rating them for creativity. Presumably this gives some indication, if one wants to go extra-national, about more "best places" to live. Florida and his collaborators define mega-regions as areas of contiguous or near-contiguous night-time luminosity as visible in satellite images. They then estimate the economic output and innovativeness of such night-time light-defined mega-regions, using national economic data for sub-regions, and thus deriving an "LRP," or light-based regional product, for each region. This is an original way to define large economic regions transcending cities, metropolitan areas, and national boundaries, and it may have some virtues compared with the alternatives. The Greater Tokyo region turns out to have the greatest LRP, beating out "Bos-Wash" (the area from Boston to Washington, first defined as a "mega-region" by Jean Gottman some decades ago in his book *Megalopolis*) for first place. Berlin, surprisingly, ranks first in "innovation" (based on numbers of patents issued).

There are other peculiar findings, suggesting the dangers of working with large statistical agglomerations. Thus we find among these mega-regions "Tel Aviv-Amman-Beirut" and "Delhi-Lahore." Now, really! Florida's point is that these mega-regions are (to quote one of his sub-heads) "the only economic unit that matters," replacing in some sense the nation. "National borders are less relevant to where economic activities are located," he writes, and "also have less to do with defining cultural identity." Tell that to an Israeli, a Jordanian, or a Lebanese; to an Indian or a Pakistani.

Florida is endlessly curious, creating new indices, sweeping up and reporting new research, and he is animated by a love for cities that makes his books, despite their considerable deficiencies, of interest to the city lover. But *Who's Your City?* is something of a mess. Its readers have almost no way of understanding where its judgments and recommendations came from. They require a more substantial and critical effort to explain how the "mega-regions" are linked to the issue of livability. Advice must be more precise if it is to be useful, especially if the question at issue is, in the words of Richard Florida's subtitle, "the most important decision of your life." ◆

ANTHONY RUSSO

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Washington Diarist

Beauty and the Beltway

A few weeks ago, the prophet Elijah appeared to me. It was almost dusk, and he took the form of a comely woman on P Street. She wore a black dress that tightly clasped her waist and sky-high black shoes with formidable fastenings. Her dark hair was pulled back vehemently into a ponytail, and drops of sun-specked metal hung from her ears. Most remarkable of all, she was dancing. A man in a dinner jacket was her partner, but he acted mainly as a pivot for her ballroom brazenness on the sidewalk, which was executed with an admirable mixture of discipline and abandon. If there was music, I did not hear it: I was in my car, driving home from the grocery, and lost in lazy thought about the upcoming election, like everybody else. It was an hour of unalloyed banality. The common tyranny of public questions I justified as a vigorous experience of citizenship, but of course it was also a human constriction. And that is why I am certain that it was Elijah in those heels: in an instant, by means of no more than a passing image of her flagrant exhibition, the woman shattered the dailiness of the street and the city, and redeemed my mind from its confinement in the news cycle. When I spied her, I remembered what else there is. I was returned to an awareness of the other domains, the receded ones. It was an urban visitation, and it lasted as long as a red light. As I drove on I noticed that the woman's performance was a promotion for a new store, but I prefer to believe that it was the refreshment of sentience that she was promoting, and the multiplicity of the realms. I was not at all embittered by the sense of what can go missing: ecstasy is not a way of life, and there is dignity in groceries. Instead I was heartened by the distinction between what beauty is and what it is not. The only thing more foolish than not seeking beauty is seeking it in the wrong places.

It is emphatically not to be sought in politics. But again and again I observe an aesthetic reverence for a politician. The subject of the trance is, of course, Barack Obama, and it was plentifully on display in *The New Yorker*'s election issue. It reached its ceiling, you might say, when the genius who some months ago drew the Obamas as terrorists in the White House now made amends by drawing Obama as Michelangelo's Adam—but tastefully cropped!—fist-bumping God, who was still a white man. But mainly the swoon was literary-critical, or more precisely, literary-uncritical. Thus we were taught that *Dreams from My Father* is "now assured of a place in the American literary canon." Why now—because its author won? That is not how the American literary canon is made. And we were told that Obama's "Democratic and Republican opponents were right: he ran largely on language," and that this is unobjectionable. And we were treated to a little professorial paean to Obama's victory speech. "Last Tuesday night was a very good night for the English language": given all that was at stake, this seems like rather a narrow focus, but still we were called to celebrate "echo, allusion, and counterpoint." The "ghost" of Lincoln was behind the speech, and Martin Luther King Jr. was its other "founder." These buttery hermeneutics strike me as mechanical and, worse, as gullible: Obama's speech was no more haunted by Lincoln's ghost than the announcement of his candidacy in Springfield was haunted by the Old State Capitol. Those associations were props; they were put there as part of the increasingly successful attempt by Obama to Lincolnize himself. It took longer for Lincoln to become Lincoln! But perhaps the adoring portrait of Obama as a savior of language is owed to a feeling of relief that in this election language narrowly escaped death: last month *The New Yorker* warned gravely of "the Republican war on words," ritually deploying Orwell against Sarah Palin's nasty (and rather obvious) incoherence. We are all Orwell now.

Truly I am not against art. But strong and lovely language is not always a vessel of strong and lovely thought. There is no simple correlation between verbal coherence and intellectual coherence. Bad writers may be good thinkers. And good writers may be liars and demagogues. We know this from philosophy—did Kant ever use the same term to mean the same thing in the same fifty pages?—and from history. Leon Trotsky was an extraordinary writer, and so was Whittaker Chambers. In his day President Eisenhower was renowned for the ugliness of his language—in 1957 this magazine published a parody by Oliver Jensen, whom we identified only as "someone in Washington," of the Gettysburg Address as Eisenhower would have delivered it: "I haven't checked these figures but 87 years ago, I think it was, a number of individuals organized a governmental set-up here in this country …"—but now we know that there was cunning in his inelegance. The demystification of political language that Orwell inaugurated in his magnificent essay was designed to tear down, not to build up, to challenge power, not to congratulate it; but there is something precious, and therefore apolitical, in the breathless parsing of the new president's sentences. A not unsmitten journal is chasing a not unwilling hero across a not unfawning field.

Nobody who has encountered the somber sensuousness of Lincoln's language, its primordial immersion in Scripture and Shakespeare, its gorgeous swings between candor and song, can regard Obama as more than artful and articulate. It would be a service to the new president to put Lincoln out of mind. America cannot be governed entirely by myth. Near the end of *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer*, Fred Kaplan's absorbing but somewhat overstated new book, I learn about Lincoln in 1861, on the eve of his presidency, that "for the time being, the only weapon he had at his command was language. … having prepared himself over a lifetime to become a well-read master of the human narrative. If that narrative was to have its tragic dimension in Lincoln's failure, despite his talents, to prevent the South's secession, shorten the inevitable war, or alleviate Northern racism, it was to be an object lesson in the limitations of language. …" Exactly so. Politics is not poetry. In the analysis of the Bush years and their disasters, the Bushisms are the least of it. I do not any more want to hear about the evil of Guantánamo. I want to see Guantánamo closed. Historically speaking, action is eloquence.

Leon Wieseltier

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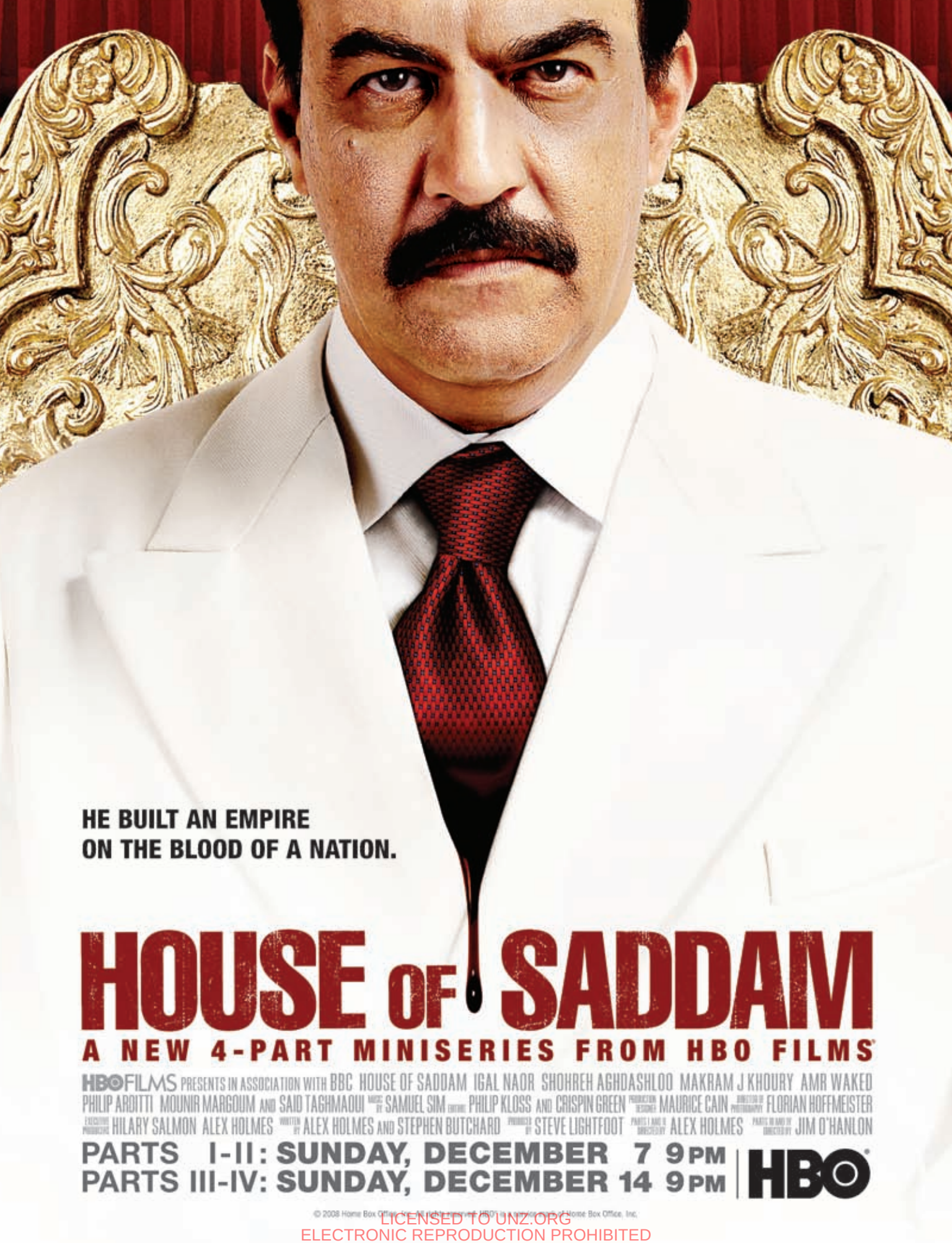
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